

Quest for Freedom in Lorraine Hansberry's *The Drinking Gourd*

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Abstract— Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was one of the most prolific African-American women dramatists who revolutionised the American theatre with her realistic portrayal of the oppression caused by racism, slavery and colonialism on African-Americans. Her play *The Drinking Gourd* exposes the horrible and the dehumanised conditions of the slaves of the plantations of Southern America. The play focuses the unquenchable thirst for freedom in Hannibal, a slave boy who is the son of Rissa. The masters of the plantations manhandle the slaves, impose lots of punishments and deny all the basic rights of them. The masters have thought that educating the slaves is a crime. Hannibal firmly believes that getting education is the only way to attain freedom and always breaks all rules of the plantation. The play ends when Hannibal faces the horrible punishment of losing his eyes for educating himself.

Keywords—Slavery, Slaves, Masters, Plantations, Freedom.

The greatest virtue is not to be free,
but to struggle ceaselessly for freedom.

-- Kazantzakis

Being an inalienable force or right, Freedom is unique and mother of all virtues. Love conquers the entire world and love can take a concrete shape only in freedom. Speaking of freedom, one must know what is freedom? What is the need of freedom? What happens when the freedom of person is seized?

Freedom recreates oneself endlessly by giving birth to itself and also determines the quality of the self. "Freedom is man's capacity to take a hand in his own development. It is our capacity to mould ourselves. Freedom is the other side of the consciousness of self" (160-161) comments Rollo May in *Man's Search for Himself*. Freedom is man's ability to mould himself with consciousness of self. The consciousness of self and freedom go hand in hand and, people aware of self become free.

For a conscious being, freedom offers all possible choices to widen the circle of individual self. Freedom is the capacity to become what one truly is. To Malinowski, an anthropologist, "Freedom is the possibility of self-realization based on personal choice, on free contract and spontaneous endeavour, or individual initiative" (242).

Hannibal, the slave in Lorraine Hansberry's play *The Drinking Gourd* (1970) risks his life to breathe the air of freedom from the deadly clutches of slave rulers. The play subtitled *The Peculiar Institution* studies three levels of antebellum southern society—planters, slaves and poor whites. Margaret Wilkerson in her article "Lorraine Hansberry: The Complete Feminist" comments, "*The Drinking Gourd* explores the brutalizing effect of United States slavery system on all who were a part of it—master, mistress, overseer, slave... set in relentless, irresistible force that is unresponsive even to those in power who mediate its terrifying effects" (236).

The Drinking Gourd mirrors Hansberry's unique and controversial view about the slave South with its capitalistic infrastructures causing vast destruction of the slave community both physically and mentally. Hansberry declares that slavery depersonalized both the oppressor and the oppressed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates in *Slave Narratives* recalls, "I saw more dearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slave holder" (312). The Africans in the name of slave trade were ruthlessly torn from their native roots such as culture and heritage, history and family. They undergone a traumatic voyage experiencing inhuman conditions over the sea and were sold into chattel slavery. Paul .A. Davis comments, "The flow of enslaved Afro-Americans must count as one of the greatest forced migration in world history" (59). Du Bois, the African leader painfully remembers that during the three and half centuries of slavery Africa was deprived of more than hundred millions of its strongest, most desirable citizens. Further he says, "Seven million Africans were stolen from their homeland and brought into the world's most liberal, enlightened, Christian, idealistic, cruel, and racist society" (3). Reduced to the level of mere stock, the slave was stripped of his past as well as his future and was also denied an identity of his own.

The chattel slavery systematically deprived of the rights and submerged the slaves into misery and often involving in mutilation. Slavery tested the essence of liberalism systematically negating the fundamental ideas of autonomy, individual consent, equality, and protection. Treated as mere properties, Katie Canon says, "The status of Chattel slavery—mere property—was permanent, hereditary, and strictly racial. African and African-American women, men, and children were reduced to the

condition of livestock... sources of capital accumulation and commodities”(29).

With a different perspective, Hansberry's *The Drinking Gourd* presents Hannibal's indomitable and unquenchable thirst for freedom and other horrors of the Southern plantation. Hansberry creates Hannibal, without the slightest ray of fear, always remains rage and aspires to the summit. While slavery fries him with its laws, he continues to search the means of gaining his freedom. He tells his niece Sarah that one day he will escape from the plantation and also assures by saying that, “I’ll come back... I’ll come back and buy you. Mama too, if she’s still livin’” (*TDG* 176). Eugene. D. Genovese affirms in *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, “the essential story of black men in slavery lay with the many who overcame every possible hardship and humiliation to stand fast to their families” (485-486). Often the courage of Hannibal threatens the little girl Sarah who warns Hannibal to be careful of his words by saying, “Trees on this plantation got more ears than leaves!”(*TDG* 173). The above statements symbolize that the slave families are always under strict surveillance, the escaping from the plantations is an attempt of committing suicide. Margaret Walker comments, “the law was strict in surveillance of the blacks and the free black man was only slightly better... his legal status was flimsy he must always have a white guardian” (92). Hannibal, but strongly believes that his manhood lies in getting the wings of freedom which takes him towards the big dipper. He also assures Sarah that one day he will rescue her and others from the clutches of slavery. With high spirit, the resistance against the soul killing laws of slavery implants indomitable quest for selfhood in him. He confirms it by saying:

I am the only kind of slave could stand to be—a bad one! ... everyday I can pretend sickness ‘stead of health, to be stupid ‘stead of smart, lazy ‘stead of quick—I aims to do it. And the more pain it give your master and the more it cost him—the more Hannibal be a man. (*TDG* 201)

Pretending to be sick or foolish, Hannibal often skips the plantation work cleverly which is the widest spread form of disloyalty. In slave history there exists two types of slaves—a slave yearning for freedom with the aid of supernatural powers escapes by killing the overseer and the other slave attains freedom by deceiving his master—fleeing. Hannibal matches with the second type. His manifestation of tricks to cheat his master endows him with quite remarkable pride. The white masters in all the plantations cleverly set the combat among slaves themselves. Some of the male slaves instead of sacrificing their life, have readily accepted the dominance of the

whites and place themselves in the service of their masters which even safeguard their family.

As an individual Hannibal represents a large number of slaves who risk their lives to gain freedom. He repeatedly puts his life in danger by escaping from the plantation. Hannibal neglects the appeal of his mother Rissa who remembers her master’s offer of making Hannibal a house servant with certain privileges. Hannibal refuses the notion of becoming like his oppressor. Hannibal, furiously shouts, “I ain’t never goni’ be no house servant, no matter what! To no master, I ain’t Mama, I ain’t!”(200) and also adds, “I don’t want nothin’ in this whole world but to get off this plantation!”(*TDG* 201). Slaves like Rissa and Coffin imagine that becoming like their masters is the only way of escaping from the harsh environment of slavery. Franklin Frazier in *The Negro Family in the United States* remains, “The emergence of the slave as a human being was facilitated by his assimilation into the house hold of the master race. There he took over more or less the ideas and attitudes and morals and manners of his master” (41). Hannibal has other plans to win the oppressors.

Hannibal ambitiously calling himself as the master becomes the chief rival of the plantation. His ambition drives him to obtain education which he feels that will help him to march towards North like his brother Isaiah. His desire to struggle against the exploiters encourages him to gain knowledge which suddenly confront with Everett Sweet. Hansberry too writes in *The Last Collected Plays*, “some of the harshest laws in the slave code are designed to keep the slave from being educated. The penalties are maiming or mutilation—death“(170). Rissa shockingly recalls the punishment for a slave who has educated himself. She tells, “I seen young Master Everett once tie a man ‘tween two sapling’s for that”(*TDG* 203) and the proud son without hearing the plea of his mother utters, “I thought you would be proud... you ain’t fit for nothin’ but slavery thinkin’ no more”(*TDG* 203) and watching him reading the lines from the Bible Rissa is stunned. She melts and shivers out of fear. Henry Louis Gates comments, “Slave education, Learning to read, “was a decisive political act; learning to write, as measured by an eighteenth –century scale of culture and society, was an irresistible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom eve larger than physical manumission” (45). The toughest task in slave’s life is educating oneself which is legally denied. The masters never wish their slave unit to be out of the shade of ignorance and also believe that education of any sort would spoil the laboring unit. Dr. Charles .S. Bacon says, “A classical education for a negro whose proper vocation is raising rice and cotton or garden truck, is as much out of place as a piano in ‘Hottentot’s tent”(59). By educating

himself, Hannibal firmly affirms his superior selfhood by imbibing the most treasured quality of his oppressor.

Hansberry brings out the danger of violating the plantation laws which is always horrible. When the news reaches Everett Sweet, he shouts angrily at Hannibal, "You have used your master's own son to commit crime against you master" (TDG 209) and orders Zeb Dudley to put out the eyes of Hannibal. The masters think that education to slaves will unfold the world around them such as gathering information about the outer life, the abolition movement, the slave revolts, the conflicts between South and North America and the means of keeping slaves under control. The masters believed that the educated slaves like Hannibal, forge passes, pass messages, and more effectively conspire to escape, rebel, or even massacre their owners which questions the progress of the plantations and its owners.

The play revolves around the plantation in South. The plantations are undoubtedly the earthly models of hell which perfectly links personal choices and social conditions of both the most ambitious white people of South and their slaves. In all the plantations of Southern region, almost the slave mob has been manhandled by the Americans, the law makers and the law breakers. The problem of South routes not from slavery but from the coexistence of two distinctive races in one society rendering coalescence impossible.

Hannibal's ambition rests on gaining freedom, where the ambition of the whites comprises of owning power and wealth. Hiram Sweet, the proud master has established his plantation thirty years ago with only few slaves. Hiram, being the kindest master declares, "Cam here with four slaves and fifty dollars and made one of the finest plantations in this district... my father gave me this gun—I was fourteen... I'm a true man now. A true man" (TDG 186-187) even his favourite slave Rissa admires him to a greater extent. Rissa comments, "Lord, you one stubborn man. I 'spect you was allus the more stubborn man ever come across" (TDG 186). Hansberry proves that power of establishing and managing of a plantation is the toughest task for the whites as it marks the status of their prestigious selfhood.

Initially in the play, freedom means in the literal sense of escaping from the physical bondage but further it dynamically reveals the worth of one's own self. Kevin Mulroy rightly says, "At first freedom meant simply an "escape from bondage but ultimately it would come to embody the larger notion of self-determination" (1). Hansberry projects that Hannibal's devotion in searching of his self freedom gains vitality among the rest and the commitment which he attaches to his quest goes beyond personal freedom which also inclusive of political and

moral freedom. His love for freedom also marks attainment of his selfhood.

Freedom exists in different ways and under different conditions in the several spheres of human activity resulting in his rational appetite. Hansberry confirms that freedom at the highest level has three definitions such as: Self-realization, self-perfection and Self-determination and therefore eternal and indestructible. Full absorption in a cause can even absolve men from the bondage of overwhelming ambition, since the real interest is in the cause and not in proving one's own superiority. Lorraine Hansberry's ambitious young, wild boy Hannibal is entirely occupied by the quest for freedom which proves his selfhood worth. His rebellious vision gives birth to a different ideology about life which is also benefited for his crew too. Hannibal at last never seeks any revenge, but possess the guts to transcend his wounded self into a proud being. Another virtue of a Hannibal is his compassion. He identifies himself with the suffering of his people and his sensitivity and empathy for them further initiates his rebellious nature. Being a man of both good and bad traits, Hannibal's attitude is curtailed when it encountered the opposite pole.

Hansberry's *The Drinking Gourd* hoists the spirit of hope and freedom by creating a reversal of stereotyped drama of an unhappy ending—spiritually and physically defeated, lynched, dead. Unfortunately the world has witnessed many heroic battles against the multiple oppressions leading to war in all possible ways.

A meaningful relationship between the self and values that lie beyond the self, is incompatible with individual freedom. Rollo May in *Man's Search for Himself* quotes the words of Nietzsche. He says, "Freedom is the capacity to become what we truly are" (165). Hansberry says that the personal freedom is the richest source of valuable life that provides the man with love, courage and honesty. In the same way the political freedom offers the individual the right to think and to act according to his own attitude. Further freedom becomes an essential ingredient of the inner strength that must characterize the free man. The man who has established emotional, moral and spiritual ties beyond the self gains the strength needed to endure the rigors of freedom. The path of attaining virtue is not an easy one which is always a thorny path.

According to Hansberry, the loss of freedom affects the core of the world as well as the being. Freedom is a living thing and indivisible too. The experience of freedom brings out the fruition of selfhood as it further articulates the space of existence and power. Freedom is an illusion nursed by man to designate his ignorance concerning regions of determination concealed from awareness. Alternatively the essence of freedom is

regarded as a myth cultivated to hide despair over one's radically contingent status in the universe. Kathy Perkins reveals, "The love of freedom is an inborn statement, which the God of nature planted deep in the heart" (11). If the freedom is lost, the existence of individual is no longer possible.

Hansberry asserts that the feel of being free enables one to find and anchor oneself firmly into the roots of existence establishing a fruitful relationship with the world around. It also transcends the self-nurturing immanent faith, hope and love within man. The only valuable human relations are those rooted from mutual freedom, where there is no domination, and no slavery. With an elaborate and profound analysis, each man measures a series of injustices which shake the world in its very foundations. People attempt to dominate, oppress and abuse fellow human beings forgetting that each one is indissolubly linked with one another in the destiny of the world. The next chapter shows the evils of war which instead of settling the issues creates a kind of hopeless and meaningless existence.

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