



Revival of hope in Lorraine Hansberry's play: *What use are Flowers?*

Dr. M Priya

Associate Professor, PG Department of English, Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Lorraine Hansberry's *What Use Are Flowers?* executed in 1962, an exceptional fantasy play deliberately presents how the world can retain its hope amidst the hardest realities and nuclear holocaust. *What Use Are Flowers?* raises intellectual queries regarding the threat imposed by nuclear wars and terrorism in the world. The play demonstrates the effects of life, death, despair and survival squeezed out of the meaningless existence of universe and the hazarding holocaust war. Having witnessed the destruction and the depression of the two World Wars, Hansberry clearly retells the suffocating and panic consequences that haunt the entire universe. Hansberry marks the revival of hope with the arrival of the old hermit. While thinking of returning to the human world which he abandoned for twenty years, the hermit meets a group of children, orphaned by war. The children behave wildly and the hermit takes up the responsibility of civilising them hoping to make a better world for the mankind.

Keywords: Lorraine Hansberry's, war, hope

Introduction

All Wisdom of is summed up in two words: wait and hope.

- Alexander Dumas

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry, the prolific African-American woman dramatist revolutionised the theatre with her realistic portrayal of the oppression caused by racism, colonialism and slavery. Hansberry's ground breaking play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) bestowed her with the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the fifth and the first African-American woman to do so. Her play *What Use Are Flowers?* presents the disasters imposed by the nuclear war in the universe.

The plot of the play *What Use Are Flowers?* runs thus. An old hermit, a former professor named Charles Lewis Lawson makes a miracle of civilizing the savage set of children. Disgusted with the follies and viciousness of humanity, the professor has vacated the city twenty years ago with an unbearable barrenness in mind wanders in the woods. After many year of wandering in the forest suddenly, he wishes to visit his city again as he needs human company. On his way he unexpectedly encounters several savage children. They look so wild and never hesitate to snatch the piece of food from the hands of the hermit. They fight like barbarians for their share. Shocked and shattered by the savageness of the little children, the hermit decides to refine them hoping for a new dawn of civilization. He pities the children and attempts to tutor them. He teaches them some words, making of wheel and also explains them the concept of love and the uses of flowers. One of the boys named Charlie constructs a wheel which is broken by Thomas out of jealous. Seeing the fight among the children, the hermit once loses his hope. He also stresses the importance of safeguarding Lily, the only girl in the group who could bring in the next generation. Suddenly while talking about the uses of flowers, the hermit dies.

The teachings of the hermit mark the blooming of hope of a

better civilization. Hansberry strongly advocates that the role of adult in moulding the young generation is quite essential, because initially the children of the forest survive with their physical strength and violence. The hermit, though frustrated about the menacing world, he never gives up his world and starts to shape the next generation by passing his knowledge. Hansberry reveals that the teaching of the hermit makes the audience to witness how the qualities of jealous and violence can be dehumanizing.

Hansberry alerts the humanity to be aware of these ruinous forces of modern life which is capable of demolishing faith in humanity. Hansberry strongly affirms that human race has no availability of prior design to arrange their life; instead they have to mend their own way of reviving hope in the universe. Steven. R. Carter recollects the argument between Hansberry and her friend where Hansberry says:

"The reason for survival does not exist in nature"...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, because that is so, I wish others to live for generations and generations and generations. (quoted in Nemiroff 224)

While speaking about the positive and productive end of Hansberry's *What Use Are Flowers?* The history holds different ideas about life. A comparative study of *What Use Are Flowers?* With William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* can make the reader to be aware about how lacking of proper guidance can lead to disaster. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* in which a group of young civilized boys try to outfit their ways in a no man's island. Unlike Hansberry who stresses the importance of worthwhile humanistic qualities, Golding projects the most destructive forces of the universe:

the hunger for power or authority and violence. The boys of Hansberry never hurts or kills any living thing for their sport, whereas the troop of Golding takes the opposite diversion by becoming savages. Thus the novel *Lord of the Rings* reverses the image of civilized to the primitives creating a sense of fear among the audience and loss of hope in individuals.

Another fact to be remembered is that *What Use Are Flowers?* Is Hansberry's firm response to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps Vladimir (Mind) and Estragon (Body) await for the arrival of Godot who never shows up till the end. Nothing significant thing happens in the play except the exchanging of hats for three times. For the people of the entire universe Godot may be interpreted according to their requirements, for some maybe the Almighty too. The play ends with a note of announcing the arrival of Godot, the next day. Further in *Waiting for Godot*, the essence rests on waiting. The human world always waits for miracles or changes to take place. Waiting, Esslin states,

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And, yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless and null and void. The more things change, the more they are the same. This is the terrible stability of the world. (52)

The waiting shows that the awakened spirit of the man to penetrate the complex condition of human life. In *Waiting for Godot*, the waiting symbolizes the amount of care and hope which the hermit exactly does. He patiently teaches and waits for the savage children to practice all his preaching. The meaningless exchange of ragged coat, the shoes, the hats and the piece of turnip in *Waiting for Godot* is contrast to the fruitful sharing of hermit's knowledge hoping to witness a change in the society. This sharing orients the human relationships between individuals as well as the society consciously.

Undoubtedly the hermit becomes Hansberry's Godot--who does come" (129) assures Anne Cheney. Reflecting the thought of Cheney, Nikki Giovanni in her article An Emotional View of Lorraine Hansberry aptly comments, "God is never late but He always comes on time" (282) and the arrival of the hermit, in way or other delights the children defeating the monotonous dullness which prevail between Vladimir and Estragon of *Waiting For Godot*. The children pursue lots of lively lessons from the hermit to better their survival tactics over poverty and many other odds. Hansberry has successfully loaded the play with the finding of the sweetest part of the wild crew. Though the hermit dies physically, his faith in civilization blooms as hopes in the children. He says that the flowers have infinite uses; similarly his teachings also help them in numerous ways by controlling their personal impulses which opens the threshold of the civilization. In particular the making of the wheel of future as well as the use of flowers symbolize the dawn of the civilization.

The play *What Use Are Flowers?* Poses a combination of prearranged and re-established order of likes and set of values whether leading to despair or terror, but at last ends with

boosting hopes. Subtitled *Who Knows Where*, Hansberry's *What Use Are Flowers?* Is an unflinching dedication that mirrors the most horrible moments of human life-like loneliness, despair, and surrendering to the sharpest and deadly threats of society leading to a superhuman effort to restore and repair life? To Hansberry war creates the danger of losing the balanced psychological and aesthetic view of life. The majestic survival against the dreadful elements of modern era also includes abundance of absurdities. Hansberry's thoughtful creation of the character of hermit in the play has no ambiguities and he takes up the responsibility of civilizing the savage children. Margaret Wilkerson writes that Hansberry has perfect, "understanding of the ambiguity of the human condition: fragile, yet filled with potential and possibility" (143). Hansberry believes that man is all possible and all potential who can make or unmake many miracles.

Hansberry projects war as the chief villain of the play which deforms individuals as well as societies. Without leaving the slightest ray of hope, the first and second World Wars caused widespread and massive destruction killing lakhs and lakhs of innocent civilians which Hansberry herself stands as a witness. Hansberry feels the toughness of wars which in modern times almost destroy the lives beyond hope of recovery with its tools like biological weapons, under bombs, carpet bomb and cluster bombs causing massive destruction indiscriminately. This scenario demands solutions for the following questions of fear and frustration. Is civilization moving towards its doom? Could mankind survive an atomic war?

Hansberry prophesies that the human civilization will survive and revive hope to have a flourishing future better than ever. David. E. Lilienthal observes, "Millions of people everywhere in the world had faith in the future" (289). Hansberry says that the task ahead proves to be the bravest and most stirring adventure of the human spirit since the circumnavigation of the globe managing the powerful, potential and free spirit of humanity in the progressive way restoring hope in humanity. She also tells that world marches towards the gateway of vast and new developments widening the horizons. Through *What Use Are Flowers?* Hansberry expresses that the humanity faces the biggest atomic challenge, yet the world has lots of hope with its powers generated in devoid of great dangers. Does this release of abundant energy provide the joy? Or is it like the release of evil jinni from the bottle who threatens or enslaves the entire world? This kind of hypothetical question even makes the world to regret for the discovery of fire, but fire, being the most beneficent tool becomes an inseparable element in the life of man and he also learns to live with it. Will it be possible for the man to live without fire? The misuse of fire destroys all likewise, the flames of holocaust war too paralyse the world. Out of despair the man asks will it be possible to lock the jinni into the bottle again?

Hansberry wisely answers the questions in the play *What Use Are Flowers?* By focusing on the victims of the atomic war. Through the character of hermit Hansberry firmly asserts that greater hope of humankind in knowledge, love and faith can make the earth to live with mercy, joy, and faith. After seeing the group of uncivilized children, the hermit having great vision bravely teaches them the civic aspects hoping to achieve the greatest.

Hansberry's deep rooted faith in mankind is indomitable and her outstanding message of hope and faith is for all times of doubts and despair. She strongly asserts that people face the future with hope and courage which offers them a plane of living, a freedom and richness of spiritual, cultural, and economic attainment. On the more profound level hopeful existence of each individual with one's own consciousness of self differentiates or transcends the particular to general. Thus, the reviving of hope in man provides an indefinite relationship between the physical and temperamental planes and so peaceful plane of living encourages the individuals to have strong faith in mankind.

Reference

1. Alexander Dumas Quotes-Brainy Quote. Web. 20 May 2016. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/alexander_dumas.html.
2. Carter, R. Steven. Hansberry's Drama: Commitment amid Complexity. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1991.
3. Esslin. Martin. The Theatre of the Absurd. 3rd ed. England: Penguin, 1987.
4. Giovanni Nikki. An Emotional View of Lorraine Hansberry. *Freedomways*. 1979; 19(4):281-282.
5. Hansberry Lorraine. The Collected Plays: *Les Blancs*, *The Drinking Gourd*, *What Use Are Flowers?* Ed. Robert Nemiroff, New York: New American Library, 1983.
6. The Nation Needs Your Gifts. *Negro Digest* 1964, 26-29.
7. Lilienthal E. David. *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writings by American Negroes*. New York: Grossman, 1966.
8. Nemiroff Robert. Ed. The Collected Plays: *Les Blancs*, *The Drinking Gourd*, *What Use Are Flowers?*. New York: New American Library, 1983.
9. Wilkerson B, Margaret. Introduction. *9 Plays by Black Women*, New York: Mentor, 1986.