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Veil: A Wall of Segregation

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Tayebeh Nowrouzi
Vali-e-Asr University,
Rafsanjan, Iran

Sohila Faghfori
Vali-e-Asr University,
Rafsanjan, Iran

Esmail Zohdi
Vali-e-Asr University,
Rafsanjan, Iran

ABSTRACT

Moving behind the confines of the race has been the continuous efforts of African-Americans so as to reveal and confirm their true humanity and abilities to white race as well as their own race. African-Americans, Dubois posited, are shut out of the white America, inhabiting behind a vast veil which creates a deep division between the races. Veil is made of the fabric of racism interwoven thread by thread and imposed by white world. It is thrown discourteously and forcibly to the African-Americans whom their distorted images are imposed on them and their true humanity and identity are hidden behind the veil. This study overtakes to present how Lorraine Hansberry, in her first and the most outstanding drama, *A Raisin in the Sun* examines the world within the veil. She demonstrated that Duboisian metaphoric veil is operating in the racist American society so that not only African-Americans are segregated physically and psychologically from the rest of the world but also are inflicted with obscurity of vision that are neither able to see themselves clearly nor be seen truly. On the other hand, it presents how the veil provides blacks with the second sight to observe and comprehend the racist nature of whites which is hidden and incomprehensible for them.

Keywords: Segregations, Second sights, Veil, Dubois, African-Americans, Race, *A Raisin in the Sun*.

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1. Introduction

Initially being defined and recognized as a piece of clothes that cover the face especially of a woman to protect or hide (Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary, 2005), the veil gained the extension of its meanings throughout the history in the works of diverse scholars especially among postcolonial critics. Fanon associated the veil as the medium of cultural maker and representative of national identity (Baer, 2007). Furthermore, imposing a limited perception on the viewer as a clothes or a mask, since it covers, hides and conceals, the veil has been recognized to function as a weapon. However, Dubois utilized the veil as a medium between the races, black and white. It serves as a wall that confined African-Americans into their world which is completely and unjustly separated from white world. In "The Forethought" to *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois writes of "leaving...the world of the white man" and stepping "within the Veil" and sketching the separated lives within and outside of the veil (2007, p.3).

The symbolic veil accurately and successfully presents the plight of being black and at the same time American in the racist American society. Racial discrimination like a veil stands between whites and blacks and although they are living and working in one country, they cannot perceive and integrate to one another. Physical and psychological segregation of white and blacks is not the sole denotation of veil; it is identified as the invisibility and obscurity of visions of blacks and whites in perceptions of each other and oneself. The veil of prejudice prevents blacks to see clearly who they are and so inflicts them in a constant search of their identity. They are born within the vile in "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the

other world" (Dubois, 2007a, p. 8). Furthermore, it functions like a curtain that does not let whites see blacks as they are. It only gives them a faint and distorted image of blacks so they perceive them as nonhumans that deserve no respect. Dubois image of the imposed veil to African-Americans is not always restricted to negative ones. He referred to it as a "second sight" which offers the black race the opportunity of perceiving the ugly and racist maneuvers of whites which is hidden from themselves. This unique experience of living behind the veil that is peculiar to African-Americans is rendered into literary works of the artist of diverse periods. *A Raisin in the Sun*, the masterpiece of Lorraine Hansberry, is one of this literary works that artistically presented Duboisian concept of the veil in the life of an African-Americans family. Hansberry portrayed how the metaphoric veil, constituted of the fabric of racism, affected the life of the younger family and exhausted the unfair treatment, strives to render and tear down the veil of prejudice. Thus, this article focuses exclusively on Duboisian definition of the veil in African-Americans life in the price winning play *A Raisin in the Sun* written by Hansberry. It attempts to presents the common misleading thought and image that the veil imposed on blacks as well as the blacks' deprivation of facilities and opportunities. The study promotes African-Americans to render the veil and represent who they really are and struggle to be accepted and respected like the other member of society. It also provides whites with a diverse perspective to view blacks outside the confinement of veil and as they really are

2. Hansberry's Biography and her *A Raisin in the Sun*

Lorraine Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois, the youngest of four children of Carl Augustus Hansberry.



Her father was politically an active and intellectual man. Despite of the financial comfort that he provided for Lorraine, he brought her up with social awareness of Blacks' conditions and the unjust racial treatment towards them. Jean Carey Bond, in an article in *Freedomways* magazine, says of Hansberry:

Born into material comfort, yet baptized in social responsibility; intensely individual in her attitudes and behavior, yet sensitive to the wills and aspirations of a whole people; a lover of life, yet stalked by death—she deliberately fashioned out of these elements an articulate existence of artistic and political commitment, seasoned with that missionary devotion which often intensifies the labors of the mortally ill (as cited in James, 1992, P.3).

In kindergarten, she praised children from the ghetto who were not afraid to fight and to defend themselves (Wilkerson, 1983, p.9). Unsurprisingly, her life was replete with racism common to the whole of African-Americans life. Her family moved to a white neighborhood where blacks were not accepted there, when Lorraine was eight years old. And Hansberry attended a white public school. Being in all white neighborhood and school made her face intense racial discrimination. Tasting the bitter felling of discrimination and being outcast in her own home, America, she was compelled to detest the discrimination and determine to fight against it. Her first hand experiences of racism also developed deep compassion for the desires and frustrations of her people, and a respect for their beauty and vigor. Thus, she devoted her whole short life and her art to her race and their uplifting. Believing in art as a vehicle of social change, she depicted the suffering and challenges of Blacks in America or Africa and urged them to defend their rights in her plays- *A Raisin in the Sun*(1959), *the Drinking Gourd* (1960), *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969), *Les Blancs*(1994).

A Raisin in the Sun firstly produced in 1959 faced with diverse receptions; some reprimanded it as being racist and trivial and some others recognized its aesthetics and introduced it as a valuable piece of literature. Eventually, getting the deserved place, the drama won the Best American Play award from the New York Drama Critics Circle. Hansberry, at a the time that blacks were marginalized, attests her excellence and ability with her success and acceptance of a black women's play in the American canon of literature in spite of gender and racial challenges.

Being as one of the masterpieces of American twentieth century, it addresses the profound issue of the era, racial discriminations. The story is about an African-Americans family, named younger family, who are tacking with discrimination within the confinement of the veil that racism has put around them. They endeavor to set themselves free from the prison with insisting on their right to choose where to live even in a white neighborhood. They did not give up despite the omen of danger and death because they stand by the possibility of rendering the veil and showing the world their true selves. They believe that "Surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the Veil and set the prisoned free." (Dubois, 2007a, P.144)

3. Methodology: Duboisian definition of the Veil

One of the salient and recurrent themes, in *The Souls of Black Folk* is that of the veil. The veil is a metaphoric film between black people and white America that has multifaceted significance. Charles F. Peterson said that the veil that Dubois coined became "the signifier, metaphor, symbol for the barrier and its resulting level and layer of tension, difference, ignorance, and prejudice that demarcate Afro-us society from mainstream American society" (2007, p.14).

For Dubois, the concept of veil refers to different facts. First, the veil as *Wilson J. Moses* in his essay, "The Poetics of Ethiopianism: W.E.B. Dubois and Literary Black Nationalism" suggested is "often, symbolic of black skin" (2001, p.66) which is a physical characteristic that differentiates them from whiteness. Dubois recognized his black skin as a veil in his early childhood experience in which a girl, a tall newcomer, refused her card in a play Card for he was black: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (2007a, p. 8).

Secondly, the veil stands as a metaphor for invisibility. The veil falling between whites' and Blacks' worlds, obscures the vision of self and other. On the one hand, it even suggests white people's lack of clarity to see Blacks as true Americans. The veil makes whites not to see the Black as they are. Blacks are obscured in America. They cannot be seen clearly, but only through the lens of race prejudice. *Wilson J. Moses* confirmed the limitation of whites' vision of Blacks: "the veil represents the limits within which the souls of black folk are confined, but veils also represent the limitations that white folk have placed upon their own vision" (2001, p.67). On the other hand, the veil refers to Blacks' lack of clarity to see them outside of what white America describes and prescribes for them. It blocked the Negro's sight and strivings, permitting him to see himself reflected only second handed, "through the revelation of the other world," (Dubois, 2007a, p. 8) which is the world of whites, therefore he suffered from double consciousness.

Lastly, the veil is a metaphor for the separation of black and white America both physically and psychologically. Physically, the veil separates Blacks and whites through

Slavery, Jim Crow laws, economic inequality, separate accommodations and the voluntary segregation that followed to the end of the civil war are among such examples. The veil acts as a physical barrier that distinguishes black Americans as the "other". Dubois, in Chapter two of *the Souls of Black Folk*, lays out the creation of the veil from the end of the civil war to the failure of reconstruction. The veil also acts as a psychological barrier separating Blacks from whites. The theme of the psychological separation of Blacks and whites is evident in the opening lines of the *Souls of Black Folk* where Dubois recalls his encounters with whites who view him not as a person but as a problem, "They half approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then instead of saying directly how does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an Excellent colored man in my town" (2007a, p.7). As it is discerned, the veil here hides the humanity of Blacks.

However, Dubois used the veil as a positive image and insisted that the veil is a gift that, like an infant's caul, provides its owner with second sight: "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,— a world which yields him no true self-consciousness" (2007a, p. 8).

Dubois referred to both African-Americans folklore and the discourse of nineteenth-century mesmerism to relate second sight to the figure of a seventh son who has been born with a veil. According to the folklore, a seventh son may see ghosts, while a child born with a caul (veil) is equipped with a second sight that lets him see ghosts as well as the future. According to mesmerism, a magnetized patient behave as if a veil has been put over her eyes that hides him/her from viewing the outside world, while a mystic second sight lets her see the future. Dubois utilized the language and



imagery of mesmerism and folk belief, to refer to the capability of Negroes' second sight, an ability to see what is ordinarily not available to be seen. In fact, he used the image of veil to imply that Blacks who are inside it, are able to perceive and to see the world outside, while those, whites, who are outside it are unable to perceive clearly those inside of the veil (Gooding-Williams, 2009, p.78). In the important essay of *Dark Water*, called "The Souls of White Folk" Dubois posited that whites mistakenly and cunningly perceive themselves as benevolent, superior and the most civilized men in the earth who are the savior of the black race from ignorance, wilderness and culturlessness. Any way black race with broader ability of perceptions gained through the veil can plainly comprehend the cruel, nonhuman and greedy essence of white Americans: "Here is a civilization that has boasted much... We whose shame, humiliation, and deep insult his aggrandizement so often involved were never deceived. We looked at him clearly, with world-old eyes, and saw simply a human thing, weak and pitiable and cruel..". (2007b, p.26)

4. Discussion

4.1 The Concept of Veil in *A Raisin in the Sun*

A Raisin in the Sun tells the story of a lower-class black family's struggle to specifically integrate and be accepted into a white neighborhood and overall into the white world. Receiving an insurance check for \$10,000 that comes from the deceased Mr. Younger's life insurance policy, the Younger family debate over how to spend it to get the most advantages out of it in the racist and separated America.

Hansberry throughout the drama portrayed the appearance of the metaphoric film which Dubois named "veil" in the life of Youngers family. She created characters that can hardly be distinguished from the other

American. As Ossie Davis claimed the point that made biggest selling of *Raisin* was the great extent to which Younger family was like any other American family (as cited in Nemiraff, 2011, p. 9). The similarities of Younger family to Americans are incontrovertible. Walter affected by the American values mostly believed that in the land of opportunity, anyone can achieve anything he wants. Similar to many other Americans, he has dreams of uplifting himself while the veil with fabrics of racism defers the dream or makes it impossible to achieve. Hansberry herself attested that "... Walter Younger is an American more than he is anything else" (as cited in Washington, 1988, p. 7). Also, the desire of mama to have a better place for the family to live is similar to those in white communities that Mr. Lindner explains. Moreover, J. Charles Washington stated that "The dreams, hopes, and fears of the Younger family are universal reflections of those shared by people of all races all over the world, and these are universally American aspirations" (1988, p. 8).

Despite the tremendous similarities that rest on their "heart and life and longing", Youngers are "shut out from their [white] world by a vast veil" (Dubois, 2007a, p.8). They are black and the black skin is the veil that keeps them out of the white worlds and white neighborhoods. Hansberry made it apparent in the scene when Mr. Lindner visits Youngers to offer money not to move. He describes white community exactly as Youngers were but he does not recognize these similarities due to their black skins. He states that

white community is made up of people who've worked hard as the dickens for years to build up that little community. They're not rich and fancy people; just hard-working, honest people who don't really have much but those little homes and a dream of the kind of community they want to raise their children in. (Hansberry, 2011, p.75).

While he accepts that whites are not perfect, and many of their beliefs may be wrong, he refutes the wrongness of their desire of choosing their neighbors. In fact, the racial beliefs are so embedded in the American society that white American cannot understand the true nature of them and they perceive denying Blacks' right for their own benefit is their definite right (Hansberry, 2011, p.75). His statement, "our Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities" (Hansberry, 2011, p. 75) makes it clear that only Negroes are not allowed to move into their community` and "the common background" that the white community expects their neighbors to have whereas it is in fact the white skin and nothing more. (Hansberry, 2011, p. 75)

Secondly, Hansberry represented how the veil makes whites not to see Youngers as they are. They cannot be seen clearly, but only through the lens of race prejudice. Mr. Lindner, the representative of white society, treats them as second hand citizens and not true Americans when he deprives them of the right to chose where to live. On the other hand, he not only gave this right to whites, but also demarcates the right of Blacks. It presents the invisibility of whites' vision that veil stands for it. On the other side, the veil refers to Blacks' lack of clarity to see themselves and be infected with double consciousness, the "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Dubois, 2007a, p.8). The Youngers family is cut in a double consciousness that makes them neither American nor African but African-Americans. The members of younger family, Mama, Beneatha, and Walter possess many characteristics of white America but since they are black, they are not perceived true American citizens. So they are constantly wondering who they are; they

cannot recognize their true identity. For instance, Walters' lack of clarity to perceive himself as an African American made him frustrated and disturbed throughout the play. Moreover, Beneatha's searching for her identity in African heritage and ignoring the influence of American values in her identity reveals her inability to observe herself clearly and truly.

Furthermore, Hansberry showed the veil as the physical barrier that divides whites and Blacks. They live in a separate district; Youngers and other Blacks are sentenced to live in poor ghettos with economic inequalities. In fact, Youngers' decision to move to a white neighborhood is the action of breaking or removing that veil and whites disapprove of it and demand to exclude them from their community. The theme of the psychological separation of Blacks and whites which the veil stands for it is also evident in Mr. Lindner's encounter with Youngers who view them not as a person but as a problem. Mr. Lindner implies that the arrival of the younger like the other Blacks in white community will evoke problems: "I am sure you people must be aware of some of the incidents which have happened in various parts of the city when colored people have moved into certain areas."(Hansberry, 2011, p. 74) He is there to persuade Youngers that they are the problems in the eyes of whites and their move to white neighborhood will not change the hearts of the whites.

Youngers are among the Negroes who were "born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world" (Dubois, 2007a, 8). Youngers inside of the veil possess the ability to perceive racism and racial behavior of the outside world which is hidden from the white. Mr. Lindner who stands for white community cannot perceive the racism behind his offer; he wants Youngers to believe him that when he tells them that race prejudice simply does not enter into his



demand and offer. He insists that it is only the way people of Clybourne Park believe, rightly or wrongly (Hansberry, 2011, p.75). He is outside of the veil and cannot comprehend the problem that exists inside the veil in black communities. His statement "That we don't try hard enough in this world to understand the other fellow's problem. The other guy's point of view" (Hansberry, 2011, p.75), ironically indicates that he intends to understand Black's problem and respect their points of view but his unconscious racist belief does not let it happen so his attempt was a sheer lost. Youngers are suffering from racism and its aftermath. On the other hand, Mr. Lindner is unable to comprehend it because he has not experienced racism; he is a member of a racist society that his ideas deteriorated it. When Youngers do not accept the money and get offended, Mr. Lindner wonders; he expresses his bewilderment for Youngers' anger. He cannot perceive what Youngers are going to gain by moving into a white neighborhood where they are not wanted; he cannot understand why they want to move to a neighborhood where people will treat them violently because they feel that their life and everything they strived for all along their life is threatened (Hansberry, 2011, p. 76). He will never understand the reason behind Youngers' decision, their desperate need and desire for fighting against racism, and defending their rights due to his lack of facing up racism. They tried to tear down the veil.

5. Conclusions

African-Americans have always suffered from the unjust segregation policy that enforced them to inhabit in complete separations from white in daily life and end up in unequal opportunities to their white counterparts. Dubois, referring to this wall of segregation as veil, discussed its impact on the life of African-Americans broadly. Following Dubois ideas on veil, Hansberry

endeavor to present the diverse implications of so called veil and the tackle of African Americans in dealing with it. Similar to Dubois, she suggested that Youngers (Blacks) are forced to live behind the veil which is build of the fabric of racism and emphasized the need of tearing it down threat by threat. Despite the similarities between Youngers and whites implied from the play, they are driven out of white world, a world specific to whites where there is no place for those with black skins. The blackness of their skin falls down between these two races. Furthermore, Hansberry represented how the veil makes whites not to see Youngers as they are. They cannot be seen clearly, but only through the lens of race prejudice. They are treated as second hand citizens and not true Americans when Mr. Lindner deprives them of the right to chose where to live. On the other side, the veil refers to the Youngers' lack of clarity to see themselves and be infected with double consciousness. Hansberry showed the veil as the physical barrier that divides whites and the Blacks. They live in a separate district; the theme of the psychological separation of the Blacks and whites which the veil stands for it is also apparent when they are viewed as problem by whites.

About the Authors:

Tayebeh Nowrouzi completed M. A. in 2013 in English Literature from Vali-e-Asr University, Rafsanjan, Iran.

Sohila Faghfori got her PhD from Calcutta University, India in 2000. She is a faculty member of Vali-e-Asr University since 2000. She is an assistant professor of English Literature majoring in social drama. Moreover, she has been a member of Psyart Foundation from 2008 until now. She has translated two books from English to Persian, one related to Psyart Foundation and one related to writing academic papers. She has

also published a good number of articles on a variety of subjects such as poetry, novel and comparative literature. She is presently more involved in a number of projects concerning film studies as well as comparative literature. **Esmaeil Zohdi** got his PhD from Calcutta University in 2000. He is a faculty member of Vali-e-Asr University since 2000. He is an assistant professor of English Literature majoring in political fiction. Moreover, he has been a member of Psyart Foundation from 2008 until now. He has translated two books from English to Persian, one related to Psyart Foundation and one related to writing academic papers. He has also published a good number of articles on a variety of subjects such as poetry, novel and comparative literature. He is presently more involved in a number of projects concerning film studies as well as comparative literature.

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