

# The Female Identity in the Play A Raisin in the Sun and the Novel Americanah

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i  
književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

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Mentorica: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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**Female Identity in the Play *A Raisin in the Sun* and the Novel**

***Americanah***

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2019

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

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## Abstract

Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* depicts the life of an African-American family in the 1950s. An important aspect of this paper will be the analysis of three generations of African-American women – Lena Younger, Ruth and Beneatha and how they deal with the changing conditions of the 1950s in the United States. The aftermath of these changes is depicted in the novel *Americanah* by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie in her fictional novel shows how a young Nigerian woman Ifemelu goes through different experiences that help to shape her character. This paper also deals with two important women – Ifemelu's mother and Auntie Uju – that impacted the development of her identity. The aim of this paper is to analyze the female identity through perspectives of both American and African-American female experience under different historical conditions in order to highlight the changes in women's lifestyle and choices in the US during the 50s and the early 2000s.

**Keywords:** identity, women, African-American, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Americanah*



## Introduction

Identity is an intricate concept that many great works have tried to interpret and comprehend. The complexity of identity seems to be in focus of two important women writers, an African-American Lorraine Hansberry and a Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Lorraine Hansberry's Tony nominated play *A Raisin in the Sun* tells a story of an African-American family living in Chicago in the 1950s. The fictional novel *Americanah*, for which Adichie won the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Fiction award, explores the story of a young Nigerian woman Ifemelu who immigrates to America in order to attend university. The aim of this paper is to analyze the different aspects of female identity and contrast the period of great change – the 1950s – with the early postmodern period of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Namely, both works deal with female characters that are searching for their identity. The perspective of African and American gives insight into lives of women who undergo certain struggles in order to create a better future for themselves.

The opening chapter of this paper attempts to define the term identity as it is understood today. The second part gives a brief overview of the social and economic conditions that ensued in the period after WWII. The third chapter analyses the individual identity through character, appearance, speech, and action, showing how these aspects define the characters in the play and the novel. The fourth chapter deals with the group identity, which socially constructed, is perceived through gender, family, ethnicity, race, and socio-economic conditions. The paper concludes with a summary of both individual and group identity and how they relate to the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Americanah*.

## 1. Identity

The concept of identity has sparked interest among artists and scholars for ages, but there is no finite definition of identity to this day. However, one can say that identity consists of diverse components that might or might not correlate. Manuel Castells in his book *The Power of Identity* says that “the construction of identity uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations” (Castells 134). It is evident that all these components contribute to creating a group identity. Individuals are born at a certain time in history, in a certain place and brought up under a certain set of beliefs. This is what James D. Faeron describes as “social” identity (11), the one which an individual cannot choose. On the other hand, we have “personal” identity (20) which can be described as a set of characteristics of a person which they deem valuable. Therefore, we can see that identity can be looked at through two perspectives which undoubtedly intermingle. The following chapters will provide a social and historical backdrop of the United States since 1950s in order to see if and how the changes influenced the construction and evolution of characters’ identities.

## 2. Historical Changes in America Since the 1950s

When the Second World War broke out, men all over the world were drafted into military service. As a result, creating large need for work force. The United States eventually joined the war, after maintaining neutrality for two years, which meant that millions of American men had to leave for service. These conditions started to affect women who were now required to take jobs in factories. As Goldin in her research *The Role of The World War II in the Rise of Women’s Work* highlights, “the 1940s were a turning point in married women’s labor force participation, leading many to credit World War II with spurring economic and social changes” (2). However, the changes initiated in 1920s, after the First World War when women first joined the paid labor force due to the rise of clerical and professional sectors and the increase in education of women (Goldin 3). Even though post-WWI period caused economic growth and also helped women gain more independence, it was not until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that the drastic increase in socio-economic conditions occurred. As Amadeo presents, life conditions started to expand even more in the 1950s, after WWII, when there was a great need for work force due to the

economic boom; “the economy grew 50%” (Amadeo). The observed increase in the 1950s was, in some sense, the tip of the iceberg. Much of the large increase was due to contemporaneous factors – the heightened post-war demand for labor, the increase in real wages of women, and the decrease in unemployment (Goldin 4). These changes simultaneously affected people of color. Professor Ray Marshal pointed out that:

Significant gains were made by nonwhites in the 1955-1962 period in professional categories such as hospital, medical and other health services, welfare and religious institutions, and business and repair services. Nonwhites also have gained relatively faster than whites in the educational services and in government employment. (183)

The growth in the U.S. labor force continued in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the increased participation of women. As a result of the surge in the women’s labor force participation rate from the 1960s to the 1990s and a large number of women in the baby-boom generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) entering the labor market, the share of women in the labor force progressively increased (Toossi, Morisi1-3). Because of the increase in economic changes, women in America were able to gain more freedom. American history made great leaps which helped to create better opportunities for women, enabling them education and work.

These changes can be seen in Hansberry’s play where the characters are living in changing socio-economic conditions of the 1950s. Lena’s son Walter has an obligation to provide for them as the only adult man in the family. But as it is, he is not the only provider, as both his wife Ruth and his mother Lena are working as maids, correspondingly supporting the family financially. Lena’s daughter Beneatha has gotten an opportunity to gain education and thus avoid labor life, which was a privilege Lena could not enjoy. Even though the living conditions are not ideal for this expanding family, they were able to make a decision to leave the crummy neighborhood in Chicago, the so-called *ghetto*, and move to a better one. Such opportunity for the Youngers shows the changing conditions in the life of an average African-American family.

On the other hand, *Americanah* explores how those changes have been implemented in the American life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ifemelu is able to get an education abroad,

something that was difficult in her home country Nigeria due to constant strikes. Her mobility to choose a city she wants to live in and being able to purchase a small apartment are just some of the resulting benefits of occurring changes in American economy since the 1950s. Many such favorable circumstances enabled Ifemelu to build a better life for herself after returning to Nigeria.

Ifemelu and Beneatha are a new generation of women whose life opportunities have drastically improved because of those who lived before them and had to live through rough life conditions. Therefore, the goal of previous generations is to make sure that future progress of life conditions and of equal opportunities is achieved.

### 3. Personal (Individual) Identity

Personal identity, as mentioned earlier, can be very challenging to describe because it finds many correlations with the previously mentioned “social” identity. Even though individuals may feel that specific characteristics prescribed to their character are a personal choice, it has been proven that they are not because individuals cannot be fully aware of the choices they make, even though such actions may seem reasonable to them. Why does one like books? Why does one like sports? Why is one interested in certain things and not the others? Why do we prefer one thing to other? These and many more such questions are difficult to describe as being under one’s control but nevertheless are important in shaping an individual’s character. As Faeron describes: “Personal identity is a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in socially relevant ways and that a person takes special pride in” (11). The best manifestation of individual’s character is through their own actions, so we can say that individuals act out their own beliefs and principles. Personal identity, therefore, can be defined as a system of values that is presented in action.

#### 3.1. Individual Female Character

Character is an essential part of individuals. It is what makes them unique and distinguishable from others. Each woman in *A Raisin in the Sun* contributes to the family dynamic in a particular way. Lena is the strongest presence in the family because her beliefs

are found to be indisputable. Such mindset is the reason why “nobody can question or challenge her authority” (Kousar 3). This is particularly because she feels a religious moral obligation and duty towards continuing her family’s legacy. That is why she is particularly strict with her son when his behavior is not one she approves of: “Ain’t nobody said you wasn’t grown. But you still in my house and my presence. And as long as you are – you’ll talk to your wife civil. Now sit down” (Hansberry 74). However, she is able to ease up on her children, especially when they make a mistake, so that she can allow for the process of growth to occur. Lena exudes a mothering presence which is both nurturing and just. On the other hand, Ruth is a constant and a quiet presence who is trying to obtain peace in the family. She is the voice of reason that tries to keep family tensions at bay: “Beneatha, you got company – what’s the matter with you? Walter Lee Younger, get down off that table and stop acting like a fool” (Hansberry 81). Ruth is always putting the needs of others before her own. Sometimes her selflessness can even be at the expense of her own happiness, which in her view does not matter as long as it helps the family. She is able to understand traditional values of the old and accept changing culture of the modern times. On the other hand, Beneatha has a rebellious nature which is prompted by her curiosity for experiencing the world. After deciding to take guitar lessons her mother tells her: “Lord, child, don’t you know what to do with yourself? How long it going to be before you get tired of this now – like you got tired of that little playacting group you joined last year? ... And what was it the year before that?” (Hansberry 50). Beneatha finds this sort of behavior normal so she is defending her diverse choices as a way of “experiment[ing] with different forms of expression” (Hansberry 50). Moreover, in this way she is trying to express herself. She strongly defends her choices even though she probably will not pursue them long term.

*Americanah* also explores different generations of Nigerian women. Their characters are portrayed independent of their family dynamic because some of them move to America. Ifemelu has ‘intellectual privilege and social mobility ...throughout the novel. While her family experiences financial hardship in a destabilized Nigerian political and economic context, and she does struggle financially as a college student in Philadelphia, Ifemelu is a character who inevitably lands on her feet” (McMann13). Ifemelu was offered an opportunity to study in America. Growing up, she was a rebellious child who did not abide by the rules, always stating her opinion. After arriving in another country, she realized that the American culture and way of life are different. She created a blog which became a

platform where she could express her strong opinions in an anonymous way. Her Aunt Uju is different, however. She is always trying to please people:

“Dike, put it back,” Aunt Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. Pooh-reet-back. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing. She was overeager with the cashier. (82)

She has wanted to create a perfect picture of an American life, although she is not as attentive when she needs to discipline her son Dike. She depended on her late husband a lot before coming to America but eventually found her footing. Even though there were times of discouragement she continued to fight for a better life. Ifemelu’s mother is close to Aunt Uju but does not share her open mindset. As a very religious woman she sees the world through God’s grace. She is not a constant presence in Ifemelu’s life but she gives her comfort: “Ifemelu was uninterested in church, indifferent about making any religious effort, perhaps because her mother already made so much. Yet her mother’s faith comforted her; it was, in her mind, a white cloud that moved benignly above her as she moved” (Adichie 37). We can conclude that Ifemelu as a young woman has two figures in her life that she can rely on. One is in the form of that which is spiritual (her mother) and other in the form of the honest reality (her Aunt). These women represent, in a way, Ifemelu’s battle with reality of American life and the spiritual yearning for the American dream.

### 3.2. Appearance – African-American Hair

Appearance shows another part of individual character that focuses on the perception of others. Apart from their skin color, African-American women find hair to be one of the more distinctive aspects of their appearance. Although this involves mostly African-American women, it is the individual’s decision which constitutes this as one person’s experience, therefore part of individual identity. In *Americanah*, a great emphasis is put on the topic of hair. African-American hair represents constant inconvenience for the women in the novel. The author shows Ifemelu’s experiences with hair salons and her journey with

hair transformation. A friend suggests to Ifemelu that she should straighten her hair in order to find a job. This decision does not please Ifemelu:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had at-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. Curt looked uncertain when he saw her. (151)

The relaxer has not only changed her hair structure but also the way she looked and felt about herself. It was the part of her that she believed did not need to be changed. She ultimately cut the hair in a “TWA, Teeny Weeny Afro” (Adichie 157). Such decision was met with scorn from her Aunt Uju: “There is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair” (Adichie 160). Many more share Aunt Uju’s opinion as such belief is common not only at American but African salons as well: “The salon girls are always like, ‘Aunty, you don’t want to relax your hair?’ It’s ridiculous that Africans don’t value our natural hair in Africa, Yagazide said” (Adichie 292). Natural hair among African women seems unacceptable in both countries which may be caused by the society’s beauty norms. Nevertheless, it creates the sense of insecurity for the women of color because it shows that natural is not desirable when it involves their hair.

Similar connections to the hair identity are found in Hansberry’s play. Kristin L. Matthews in her essay points out that: “In one early exchange, Asagai uses Beneatha’s straightened hair as a metaphor for her race consciousness, accusing her of self “mutilation” (Hansberry 61) and “accommodation” to that which is easier to “manage” (Hansberry 61-62) ... (Matthews 558). Because Beneatha is easily impressionable, she understands Asagai’s words as a motive for change of her ‘American’ identity. But when she decides to cut her hair making it “close-cropped and unstraightened” (Hansberry 82), in order to embrace her African heritage, George and Ruth are appalled by it. They represent American standards that do not accept natural African-American hair. Beneatha is met with criticism on both sides for her appearance, but nevertheless shows how she is willing to experiment with her hair in order to find her identity. She is met with the same criticism about her natural hair as Ifemelu, but is she is proudly showing her African heritage because she

would rather not be assimilated. In Beneatha's case, straightening her hair is an individual choice that represents convenience, but for Ifemelu it is matter of getting a job. Regardless of the reason, it is deeply connected to their individuality.

### 3.3. Opinions – Education and Religion

Knowledge plays an important role in creating an individual in such a way that it builds their set of opinions. Some of these opinions can be product of a larger group belief or something that individual learnt. Nevertheless, it shapes the perception of their reality. Education in Hansberry's play and in Adichie's novel is reserved for the younger generations. Ifemelu and her Aunt Uju leave their home country Nigeria in order to get a higher education in America, while at the Youngers the only one getting a higher education is Beneatha. Educational background of younger women makes for heightened perception of the world, therefore, making them more aware of the bigger societal issues and creating a feeling of obligation to tackle them. Beneatha believes that her identity is rooted in her ancestry and she is enthusiastic to know more about the African part of her identity (Nowrouzi 6). She believes those issues to be more important to her than to her uneducated family. Ifemelu, too, feels connected to her 'second' identity or the title *Americanah*. She is motivated to write about social problems on her blog titled 'Various Observations About American Blacks' (Adichie 229) where she engages in uncomfortable discussions on race and politics. She starts a blog in order to state her opinion on the racial biases that she encountered since moving to America. She wants Americans to better understand the perspective of African-Americans and other people of color. This blog gives her an American perspective on race because in Nigeria she never had to think about it since she was not a minority there.

Education seems to be one of the reasons for these women having no relationship with religion. Bloom states that "Beneatha's atheism is not homegrown and not based on African tradition but rather it initiates as a result of her education and the influence of American culture" (Bloom 156). Likewise, Ifemelu has had difficulty connecting with her overly religious mother: "Ifemelu was uninterested in church, indifferent about making any religious effort, perhaps because her mother already made so much" (Adichie 37). On the other hand, in *A Raisin*, older generation of women keep the relationship with God. Lena is a "representative of older generation of blacks who migrated to the north during the



industrial boom of the early twentieth century”(Matthew 561), which makes her understand that life could be much worse. Older generation had a lot to lose so the gratitude for little things is greater: “Now when you say your prayers tonight, you thank God and your grandfather – ‘cause it was him who give you the house – in this way” (Hansberry 93). Ruth’s faith is not as strong because she comes to question her decision to keep the baby and seriously considers getting an abortion, which would be regarded as sin. In a moment of desperation, ”Ruth believes that another mouth to feed will stymie the Younger family’s chances to ‘get out’”(Matthew557). Even though she has decided to have an abortion, she realises the pain it would cause her: “Ain’t nothing can tear at you like losin’ your baby” (Hansberry 48).Ruth sees abortion as the only solution to get a better life, and because she values family she is willing to sacrifice her unborn child. Lena knows what it means to lose a child but she also realizes that she cannot influence Ruth’s decision. Because she wants her son Walter to stand up for this unborn life, she confronts him saying: “I’m waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy and say we done give up one baby to poverty and that we ain’t going to give up nary another one ... I’m waiting” (Hansberry 77).

Beliefs of these women are rooted in either reason or religion. Those who stand on the side of reason have found their meaning by fighting the social injustices. Those who stand on the side of creed find their meaning in everyday’s blessings that they are able to enjoy.

### 3.4. Action

The most important aspect of individual or personal identity is action. It shows one’s authentic beliefs and intentions, which a person is not always aware of. Actions help others get a perception about an individual without knowing what his opinions and beliefs are. This section mainly focuses on how behavior of an individual aligns with his speech. In Younger family we can see Lena and Beneatha in opposition when analyzing this aspect of individual identity. Lena is, as mentioned previously, an older woman whose religious beliefs are the primary motivation for action. She stands her ground because faith in God is what keeps her dignity: “Son – I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers – but ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay’em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth. We ain’t never been that

poor”(Hansberry 142). Lena demonstrates her love for her son in the darkest times which shows the principal of Christianity:

Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning – because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself' cause the world done whipped him so! When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. (145)

Lena's actions match her utterances which are rooted in Christian values. Beneatha, on the other hand, constructs herself according to the interaction, intermediating between her American or African identity. She sometimes uses statements and expressions that are common in Ebonics, black vernacular English, for instance “that raggedly-looking old things” (Hansberry 121) while in some other occasions, particularly in speaking with her white friends or assimilated Negroes, she utilizes Standard English (Nowrouzi6). Moreover, after embracing her African heritage she decides that staying in Chicago is the best option, making all of her earlier claims about going to Africa appear meaningless. Therefore, Beneatha gives an impression that she does not truly believe in the things that she is saying. Her words are often spiked out of hurt or anger but she eventually comes to realize what the meaningful things in her life are.

*Americanah*'s Aunty Uju shows similar character to Beneatha's when she criticizes American values but tries hard to adapt to them:

She was overeager with the cashier. “Sorry, sorry,” she said as she fumbled to get her debit card from her wallet. Because the cashier was watching, Aunty Uju let Dike keep the cereal, but in the car she grabbed his left ear and twisted it, yanked it. ... Aunty Uju turned to Ifemelu. “This is how children like to misbehave in this country. Jane was even telling me that her daughter threatens to call the police when she beats her. Imagine. I don't blame the girl, she has come to America and learned about calling the police.” (82)

Even though she tries to conform to American life, Aunty Uju has not forgotten the values of her own culture. Therefore, she shows that different situations require one of these two identities to emerge.

#### 4. Social (Group) Identity

Every individual is a member of a particular group. Groups are “socially constructed and historically contingent” (Faeron 10). Therefore, social and historical circumstances determine different aspects of an individual, such as language, nationality, ethnicity, etc. Social identity refers to “a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes” (Faeron 2). There are three substructures that arrange social identities according to distinctive sets of characteristics. First substructure Faeron defines as “social categories which are generally objective social facts beyond the reach of any one individual to change” (15). Race, gender, hair color, etc. fall under the category of objective facts. Secondly, there are role identities referring to “labels applied to people who are expected or obligated to perform some set of actions, behaviors, routines, or functions in particular situations” (17). Finally, he describes type identities which “refer to labels applied to persons who share or are thought to share some characteristic or characteristics, in appearance, behavioral traits, beliefs, attitudes, values, skills (e.g. language) .... and so on” (17). In order for an individual to belong to a group they need to abide by a certain set of predetermined rules and also belong to a community of people sharing similar values.

##### 4.1. Gender Identity

This part of group identity can be summarized as feelings about one’s own gender and sexuality. It also encompasses larger part of the gender identity and that is biological sex, which excludes the initial premise of the subjectivity of gender. In accordance to the topic of this theme we are focusing on female sexuality, namely their relationships with men. Women are known to want an emotional connection rather than a sexual one. Beneatha searches for such a deeper connection with an African-American student George and an African student Asagai. While dating George, she finds it hard to connect with him: “Oh, I just mean I couldn’t ever really be serious about George. He’s – he’s so

shallow”(Hansberry 51). After meeting Asagai she finally finds the connection that she has been looking for. They find common ground in African culture that Beneatha desperately wants to be a part of: “Mr. Asagai – I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity!” (Hansberry 64). This shows that her interests are not necessarily aimed towards Asagai as a man, but rather, towards finding her identity. It is not revealed whom she chooses between Asagai and George, but her feelings to go to Africa remain unchanged till the end.

In *Americanah*, while living in America, Ifemelu eventually starts dating a white American businessman Curt; she also enjoys all the benefits of a rich life. Even though she was happy she cheated on Curt: “She did not know what it was but there was something wrong with her. A hunger, a restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of herself. The sense of something farther away, beyond her reach” (Adichie 212). After ending the relationship with Curt, she met Blaine, a young African-American teacher. The relationship with him was different due to shared African experience, but she soon realized that his work was more important to him. In both relationships Ifemelu was searching for the same connection she had with Obinze:

Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself. He was now a husband and father, and they had not been in touch in years, yet she could not pretend that he was not a part of her homesickness, or that she did not often think of him, sifting through their past, looking for portents of what she could not name. (10)

During her time in America she has always longed for her Nigerian life. Part of this connection was the time that she spent with Obinze and the love they both shared. The relationships helped Ifemelu and Beneatha to explore more about their sexuality while also uncovering more about their individual needs and desires. Knowing themselves is what prompted the decision to return to what initially seemed familiar.

## 4.2. Familial Identity

Nurturing nature is a distinguishable part of a woman. Female psychoanalysts view the capacity for motherhood as a central to the development of female sexual identity (Katz 8). Women in both *A Raisin* and *Americanah* show strong tendencies towards family unit. Ruth understands the importance of a family and is willing to even get an abortion to help with the financial situation. It is Ruth's "persistence with which she tries to aid her family and keep their home in order" (Matthew 557) that makes the Youngers remain committed to moving to a better neighborhood. Lena, as mentioned previously, cares about the family legacy and raises hers with a sense of dignity: "She is the person who provides the opportunity for her daughter to get educated and have a better future in spite of the difficulties and racial prejudice" (Nowruozi 6). She aids her son and Ruth through troublesome times, making them see value in commitment to marriage.

In the novel, Adichie explores the subject of abortion through Aunt Uju's character. When she got pregnant for the second time with a General named Oga, her decision was to keep the baby: "I did not plan this, it happened," Aunt Uju said. "I fell pregnant for Olujimi in university. I had an abortion and I am not doing it again" (Adichie 63). Even though she is overwhelmed with the news, she believes that raising the child in America is the best option. Aunt Uju is forced to leave earlier for America. Having Dike gave her a new sense of meaning and she moved to America to pursue a long desired medical career, and also to assure a better future for her son. Soon she finds herself wanting to have a family again: "I want another child. We've been trying" (Adichie 137). In this new relationship there is no love but rather convenience because Aunt Uju desperately wants to have a family. However, she is eventually forced to support Dike on her own.

The reoccurring theme among older women in *A Raisin* and in *Americanah* is the commitment to the long-term family life. Even Ifemelu finds herself dreaming about having a family with Curt: "... Ifemelu thought, as she sometimes fleetingly did, of being married to Curt, their life engraved in comfort, he getting along with her family and friends and she with his ..." (Adichie 148). Beneatha initially tells her mother: "I'm not worried about who I'm going to marry yet – if I ever get married" (Hansberry 53), but changes her mind about marriage after meeting Asagai. This evidently shows that these women desire maternal role

as the next step in the womanhood. Marriage is shown indifferent time periods but one part of the group that these women all categorically belong to is a desire for familial identity.

### 4.3. Ethnic and Racial Identity

The relationships between Nigeria and America are eminent aspects of the identity of characters depicted in both works. Race is explored in Hansberry's play and in Adichie's novel at different times in American history. *A Raisin* is set at a time of great economic change but where segregation is still a predominant element of the society. On the other hand, Nigeria is shown at a constant economic decline at the turn of the century. Ifemelu recognizes great opportunity that is America, but nevertheless finds adjusting to this life unnerving. After experiencing American culture, she realized the concept of race and racial hierarchy in America, to which she dedicates her blog:

There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place. (Or as that marvellous rhyme goes: if you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, get back!) (138)

She understands that history plays a major role in determining this hierarchical structure, but that is also a new concept which she never contemplated at home in Lagos: "Race doesn't really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black" (Adichie 343). America was a place where she had to adopt double consciousness, which can be described "as a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 5), but also "a place of a fluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty" (Adichie 8). She noticed when she returned to Lagos that people treated her differently because she lived in America, getting job offers that would never occur had she not been abroad. Fighting against these two parts of the identity is seen with the title of the novel: "Americanah!" Ranyinudo teased her often. "You are looking at things with American eyes. But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American

accent we would tolerate your complaining!” (Adichie 277). Changing her accent did not keep Ifemelu from adopting some part of the American culture.

Unlike Ifemelu, Beneatha does not notice the great opportunities of the American society, so she tries to adopt African culture that she previously did not acknowledge. Due to Asagai’s comments on being assimilated she finds herself embracing the other part of her heritage while also neglecting the American:

*(Emerging grandly from the doorway so that we can see her thoroughly robed in the costume Asagai brought) You are looking at what a well-dressed Nigerian woman wears – (She parades for Ruth, her hair completely hidden by the headdress; she is coquettishly fanning herself with an ornate oriental fan ...) ... (She promenades to the radio and, with an arrogant flourish, turn off the good loud blues that is playing) Enough of this assimilations junk!*  
(78)

She cannot explain what the African dance means when Ruth asks her about it, which shows that for her this is mostly material rather than cultural. She is not willing to learn about it before she is willing to implement it. At a certain point we can see these two aspects of heritage coming together when she goes on a date with George “dressed for the evening in a cocktail dress and earrings, hair natural” (Hansberry 78). Her identity is the merging of Africanism and Americanism and none of them should be sacrificed (Nowrouzi 5). Both women fought to eliminate one part of their ethnicity but they evidently failed because it represents a bigger part of their identity, the entire American society that they belong to.

#### 4.4. Socio-Economic Identity

Previously mentioned section about the history of economic boom will show the depiction of the consequences that ensued in the family unit and their connection with life in 21<sup>st</sup> century in America. Because of the sudden economic growth that occurred in post-war period, women and men were able to enter the work force. Youngers are a working-class family in 1950s Chicago. Lena, along with her son Walter and his wife Ruth, has been working most of her life. Ruth and Lena never received education because “one who was

educated or possessed skill would have more opportunities for advancement” (Nowrouzi 7), so the only alternative was to work. After receiving the ten thousand dollars check, Youngers are able to move to a better neighborhood. The white neighborhood is cheaper for Lena to purchase because Blacks receive lower wages which is forcing them to live in less pleasant places (Nowrouzi 2). The opening of the play offers a detailed description of a small apartment that Youngers live in:

a section of this room, for it is not really a room unto itself, though the landlord's lease would make it seem so, slopes backward to provide a small kitchen area, where the family prepares the meals that are eaten in the living room proper, which must also serve as a dining room. The single window that has been provided for these “two” rooms is located in this kitchen area. The sole natural light the family may enjoy in the course of a day is only that which fights its way through this little window. At left, a door leads to a bedroom which is shared by Mama and her daughter, Beneatha. At right, opposite, is a second room (which in the beginning of the life of this apartment was probably a breakfast room) which serves as a bedroom for Walter and his wife, Ruth. (26-27)

Youngers have been living in this crummy apartment for many years, unable to leave it. Even with three people working they could not afford a bigger place. Ruth and Lena clean rich people's houses and Walter is a chauffeur, which are all low-income jobs. They are unable to compete on the market which concentrates on financial and marketing knowledge and skills. Walter faces these challenges when he tries to open a liquor store but is robbed of the money that Lena received after her retirement. Ultimately, Youngers manage to purchase a property in an all-white neighborhood, demonstrating that African-Americans can live in better communities and are not dependent on a life in *ghetto*.

In Africa, life for Nigerians is limited and uncertain as a result of the country's political tensions. Ifemelu and Auntie Uju decide to move to America for the chance of better opportunities and education. They both struggle to pursue higher education and simultaneously earn money to pay the rent:



I'm tired. I am so tired. I thought by now things would be better for me and Dike. It's not as if anybody was helping me and I just could not believe how quickly money went. I was studying and working three jobs. I was doing retail at the mall, and a research assistantship, and I even did some hours at Burger King. (83)

Ifemelu's struggle with paying the rent causes her depression. After sending many job applications and receiving no feedback, she finally manages to land a job as a nanny, where she later meets Curt. Living her new rich life with Curt brings her a previously unknown sense of security:

The couch was soft. Her skin was glowing. At school, she took extra credits and raised her GPA. Outside the tall living room windows, the Inner Harbor spread out below, water gleaming and lights twinkling. A sense of contentment overwhelmed her. That was what Curt had given her, this gift of contentment, of ease. How quickly she had become used to their life, her passport filled with visa stamps, the solicitousness of flight attendants in first-class cabins, the feathery bed linen in the hotels they stayed in... She had slipped out of her old skin. (148)

The relationship with Curt initiated a string of good opportunities, but afterwards she found her own footing and was able to purchase a small apartment. Because of high education and work in a developed country such as America, she did not need to struggle to find a decent job in Nigeria. After coming back home, she immediately found a job as a columnist in a magazine, but eventually decided to start her new blog. Mobility to do whatever and be wherever she wanted is all due to continual improvements of the conditions in American economy and society, as well as being able to change one's status from working-class to middle or even to rich. Undoubtedly, these advancements caused women to gain more freedom when choosing their career.

## Conclusion

Depiction of female characters in *Americanah* and in *A Raisin* shows not only the deeper understanding of female nature but also the how different historical periods are affecting their lives. Older generation of women, such as Lena, Ruth, and Ifemelu's mother, had not been given an opportunity to build a better future for themselves. At a time when women's rights were fairly limited, these women's only option was to work. Everything changed after America experienced an economic boom that stimulated an array of opportunities for women in the work force and in regards to education. With it, younger generation of women – Ifemelu and Beneatha – were able to climb up the socio-economic ladder which allowed them to make more independent choices. Individual identity shows how women in both works have been able to develop their personal sense of identity which is vividly interpreted through their actions. Unique attributes of these account for the variety of interests and experiences. Accordingly, group identity represents all the aspects of women that are understood under the concept of womanhood. Each of these women values the roles of motherhood which are inevitably connected to their sexuality. Setting goals for the future is part of a dream that eventually involves a caring and nurturing family life. While the older generation understands the value of family and unity, the younger generation is trying to realize what those values are for them while also grasping the sense of their own identity. Whether the period is 1950s or early 2000s these women's depicted experiences have become archetypes for the stories of all the women whose experience embody those depicted in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Adichie's *Americanah*.

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