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Address

•Vikram Nagar, Boudhi Chouk, Latur.
•Tq. Latur, Dis. Latur 413512
•(+91) 9922455749, (+91) 9158387437

Email

•aiirjpramod@gmail.com

Website

•www.aiirjournal.com

CHIEF EDITOR – PRAMOD PRAKASHRAO TANDALE

Nuptial Skirmish and Wrangle in Lorraine Hansberry's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*

Yuvraj Nimbaji Herode,

Assistant Professor in English,

Shivaji Shikshan Sanstha's Science and Commerce College (Night),

Pant Nagar, Ghatkopar (E), Mumbai-75. Cell: 7219683552

Abstract:

In the contemporary time, marriage system is on the brink of absolute obliteration due to the impulse of the quest of self-determination in both man and woman. In the patriarchal social order and family system, male is a dominant gender that has been given the disproportionate authority over the female gender who is only surrendered to man as a sexual object. At this instant, women became independent and self-reliant by discarding their subservient and submissive status and hegemonic prominence of man in family and marriage system. These women are protesting against male chauvinism and narcissistic assertiveness of men for the grade of equilibrium in the family. This metamorphosis, of the attitude of women, consequences conflict in matrimonial relation. The present paper attempts to highlight the ideological conflicts in the conjugal relationships between man and woman.

Key Words: Matrimony, Degradation of Women, Male Chauvinism, Conflict,

The play is a life study of modern man and woman caught up in the conflict between not caring and caring too much. The play sets in a homogeneous culture, but many cultures collide in Greenwich Village. The people who enter Sidney's apartment represent wide variety of backgrounds. Iris is Greco-Gallic-Indian; Mavis, Iris's sister, is a middle class; Gloria, another sister, is a call girl. Mavis believes that there is too much pain in real life and wants art to offer a peaceful escape. She believes in middle-class values and in the business life. Gloria, the prostitute, sacrificed happiness on the stand of her business. Mavis suspects in her heart that anti-Semitism and racism are probably wrong and tries with changing degree of success, to conceal their willfully hold on her. Iris, although vocally open-minded of everybody, offers all sexual deviants, radicals, and little compassion and even less understanding.

The play also deals with the strained conjugal relationship of Sidney with his wife, Iris, because he refuses to recognize the reality of the world but chooses rather to remold it, and her to suit his own personal vision. Sidney has been having a bad time with his wife, "a feather weight who wants to be an actress but is willing to leave him to do television commercials". (Sharon, 1941:184) Sidney inclines to a romantic dream of man as an innocent and free spirit suitably removed from the conventional corruption of the city. In this mood, he takes Huck Finn as an archetype of noble dissociation and sees Iris as a mountain nymph. There is a bitter nervousness in Iris's demand to know which role she would play — Margaret Mead or Barbara Allen. She lives her life as a counterpart to her husband and his sudden and impractical enthusiasms thrown an increasing strain on their relationship. The crisis between Sidney and his wife is ultimately a crisis of Sydney's liberalism. Iris rebels against the barrenness of life which settles around idealistic dreams and superficial actions. A life of philosophical assumption and meaningless activity entirely lacking in a commitment means anything more than an irresponsible game. This game achieves nothing more than the exchange of one corruption for another.

Sidney has closed his failed night club and has purchased a newspaper. But he is more an intellectual than a businessman. His wife quarrels with him for his failure in business and for "an

undefined sexual problem". (Kanakaraj, 2002: 46) Sidney cares deeply about the sufferings of others. He strongly opposes all forms of social and political oppression. He displays concern to the point of interfering daily in the lives of those around him. Sidney compels his wife to distort her character by living up to his fantasy image of her. Sidney is transported by dream to his imaginary world of the mountains. He dreams that "the Iris of his mind appears barefooted with flowing hair and mountain dress, and mounts the steps. She embraces him and then . . . dances in the shadows before him . . . gives him a final kiss and flees."(Hansberry, 1964: 71-2) He has evolved a fantasy of the pure air of the mountains with only a spiritedly, barefooted mountain girl beside him. And he has pressured his wife, Iris, to be that girl. This fantasy is not a full-time refuge for him but a flight for those moments when social and personal strife become too painful. Due to her attraction to Sidney, Iris had originally been contented to play this role for him. When Sidney becomes free with the clear streams, yearns and steam, Iris quietly tells him that she hates her long hair. Having come from different environment and considering it boring, she has become increasingly dissatisfied with his fantasy about her and strives to make him aware of the true urbane-loving personality. The strain between his fantasy and her reality finally drives her to leave him. Sydney's chauvinistic fantasies drive Iris away from him, because she increasingly feels the need to live in accordance with her recognition of her inner realities and drives. Only at the play's end, when Sidney seems more able to face reality in general and the reality of women in particular, Iris is willing to return to him. Iris is the primary woman in Sydney's life. She tolerates the "Pygmalion-like relationship" (Wilkerson, 1972: 65) that initially attracts and continues to hold her husband. Despite his progressive outlook on society, Sidney's views on women are nearly degraded. He degrades Iris's attempts at intellectual discourse and emphasizes a girl-child image, complete with flowing hair and peaceful ignorance. When Iris begins to rebel against this image by cutting off her long hair, Sidney is shocked. In an attempt to gain some independent status and to compensate for her failures as an actress, she settles for television commercials whose products make unjustifiable claims. However, Iris's desire for the glitter of stardom does not blind her to the truth about the progressive politician whom Sidney is supporting. She realizes that Sidney is a stooge of the political bosses who have always fostered drug traffic and other criminal activities in the area. She notices that Sidney, with all his scholarly intellectuality, has not seen through a cheap politician.

When Iris tells Sidney that she is going to a party, his high spirits are quickly grounded. He forces her to tell him that theatre colleague Ben Asch will also be a guest. Sidney suspects that Ben is her lover. Iris acknowledges that she is "the world's lousiest actress", but says, "I just want something to happen in my life".(Hansberry, 1964: 88-9) When Iris leaves, Sidney is depressed. He calls upstairs for David to come up and asks him to write Iris a part in his next play. Sidney is offering to write David a good review in payment for creating a part for Iris. In Sidney, Iris, indeed found a thinker. But he lacks the empathy and compassion to understand her desire to become an actress, to escape her rural background, "to know that when I die more than ten or a hundred people will know the difference. I want to make it, Sid". (Hansberry, 1964: 78) Until the end of the play, Sidney sees Iris as a perfect mountain girl, an adolescent beauty. Sidney is philosophical enough to understand what has been done to Gloria and the reason that she kills herself. He realizes that he has caused limitless damage by keeping a false concept of woman. He also realizes that he must free himself from all such concepts and see his wife as an individual if their marriage is to be preserved. And he finds that his wife wishes to be a partner in this struggle.

For Iris, creativity and sexuality mingle in a state of prevented development. Her acting is obviously in an emerging form. She is attractive, dense and graceful, but she has not studied her craft seriously. David describes one of her performances as horrible. Hansberry seems to be saying that until

one's sexual behavior is mature, personal satisfaction is not possible. The play implies that Iris will pass through the stages of Golden Girl and mountain lass and mature as both an actress and woman. Gloria could only symbolically be considered an artist. She has sensitivity and compassion associated with the artist. She loves and is loved by Alton. Her sexuality is distorted and almost schizophrenic. She endures sex, sometimes sadistic sex, for money. She longs for the warmth of Alton's love. She has made her fortune as the model of the bright American girl. Through the play, Hansberry pleads for maturity and commitment in sexuality and creativity. Despite his random emotional torture, David is committed and fulfilled being giving more than he takes.

Gloria's name has vague religious overtones which may suggest her essential innocence. She appears sexual with medium-length golden hair. She is the high priced prostitute. She wants rich men. She takes this short cut to success by becoming a prostitute. At the age of nineteen she had come to the city from the country and had become high fashion whore. Iris says. "I happen to have a sister who is a fancy call girl, a big-time, high-fashion whore She's racking up thousands of tax-free dollars a year and it's her life so —." (Hansberry, 1964: 50-1) She has accepted the need for compromise that "if you want to survive you've got to swing the way the world swings." (Hansberry, 1964:138) She sits with Sidney and David, all questioning the meaning of their lives. Gloria dislikes David when he says, "Isn't it the great tradition for writers and where to share the world's truths?" (Hansberry, 1964:126)

Gloria had the fantasy that she could leave her milk-lined, disgusting profession, by marrying Alton, a young black man. After seven years and three attempted suicides, she sees a chance to save herself. Alton proposes her and she decides to accept it. When Alton discovers that she is a call-girl, however, his own racial past combines with physical disgust. Gloria becomes for him a commodity which has been used by white men. In disgust against this past, he sacrifices compassion to pride by saying, "I don't want white man's leavings, Sidney. I couldn't marry her". (Hansberry, 1964:102) Sidney underlines the racial nature of Alton's failure. His concession is equally an admission of the futility of an intellectual commitment unsupported by emotional engagement. Gloria's guilt causes her to try suicide four times. She is a tramp. She chooses Alton as a fiancé, who is attractive, intelligent, and compassionate. She, perhaps, could have prevented Alton's rejection of her, if she had told him the truth before he learned it from someone else that she had given up her business. She planned to lead a new life. But she felt she could not escape her past.

As a call girl recruited for her innocence, Gloria has been paid to let men make her part of their warped sexual fantasies. She has suffered such mental and physical abuse that she begins taking drugs to escape. After being severely beaten by one of her clients, she decides to break free from the life by marrying Alton. Alton has been told about her profession. He is so appalled by the destruction of his idealized conception of her that he is unwilling even to talk to her. Revolving with shock from this, she is approached by another of Sidney's friend □ David. He wants her to aid him in a degenerate sexual fantasy. She deliberately takes an overdose of drugs. After learning from a note that Alton will not marry her, Gloria begins drinking and taking pills. After much drinking and singing, she plants a long, wet kiss on David's mouth. As Sidney lays drunk and self fascinated on the couch, she goes in to the bathroom and kills herself. Gloria's suicide is a form of non-commitment to herself. Gloria is the most tragic victim, in the oppression of women. For Gloria there is no new beginning at least not in this life. She had become trapped in a role that her world made attractive, a role that she continued to accept and to which she became addicted. Her end is inevitable self-destruction. Hansberry places in the hands of Gloria, the true education of Sidney and reveals the varied versions of women's victimization.

Gloria is failed not only by Alton but equally by Sidney, Iris and Mavis as well. When Mavis hears of the proposed marriage, she is horrified. While aware of the beneficial value to her sister,

the idea of miscegenation seems worse to her than prostitution. Even though she has abandoned prostitution, she feels branded for life. David tells her, "Trying to live with your father's values can kill you . . ." Gloria replies, "No, sweetie, living without your father's values can kill you". (Hansberry, 1964:132) David is convinced that prostitutes are the inheritors to the wisdom of the ages. Alton proclaimed his identification with all the oppressed and his overwhelming sympathy for them. He is unable to forgive the woman he loves for having allowed herself to be victimized as a prostitute.

Representative of the middle class, Mavis is not a hopeless racist. Iris and Sidney tell her of Gloria's engagement to Alton in a teasing insensitive manner. Then she becomes more accepting Sidney's Jewish heritage. She will eventually understand Alton's blackness and David's sexuality. Set in Greenwich Village, the precursor of social and artistic growth, the play indicates a society aware of rich ethnic backgrounds but free of racial strife. Alton Scales epitomizes black identity and pride. When Iris playfully accuses him of being a "white boy playing black boy," he replies, "I am black boy. I didn't make up the game, and as long as a lot of people think there is something wrong with the fact that I am a Negro. I am going to make a point out of being one". (Hansberry, 1964:41)

For this reason, he has no choice but to reject Gloria after he learns of her tawdry past. Alton declares that he would have forgiven Gloria, if she were a black. Where Alton differs from Sidney is in the degree to which right and wrong, the sympathetic and unsympathetic are entangled in his most important act and his rejection of Gloria for having been a prostitute. His father's pride would hurt by having to accept the white man's leavings to survive. The racial pride makes him want to identify fully with his fellow blacks and their struggles. However, his view of Gloria as another piece of the white man's leaving must be rejected for the sake of his racial pride. It not only displays a racial attitude, but is also a heartless and narrow-minded act. He loses sight of Gloria as the individual and loves and regards her only as a fallen woman. He is a being no less insensitive toward Gloria.

All the three Parodous sisters are in psychic problem. Hansberry did not see psychiatry as a real solution. Gloria continues to accept clients who are sometimes cruel and violent. When she arrives at the Brustein apartment she is badly hurt. Alton helps her make the break from prostitution, but he does not steel her against the world. Mavis began analysis five years before, when Iris married Sidney and when Fred began his affair. The analyst no doubt helped her cope, but her life is depressingly a sexual, segmented and dull. Iris talks more about her doctor than do her sisters but comment about treatment becomes a satire on psychiatrists. Iris discusses about terms such as love-hate obsession, mother complex and unconscious versus subconscious motivation. Sidney never opposes the fact that the terms have no real meaning to her. They are only jargon, a substitute for facing real problems.

The Parodous sisters enjoy a close relationship. Hansberry delineates each character in terms of names and physical appearance. Iris's name suggests a flower of delicacy, beauty, femininity. Mavis's name lacks imagination. Mavis was the name of a very sweet popular chocolate soft drink of the time. It was also the brand name of a cheap scented talcum powder. Gloria's name has vague religious overtones which may suggest her essential innocence. Iris, with her lonely flowing dark hair may be considered the most sexual. Hair is an ageless symbol of fertility. Gloria with medium length golden hair appears sexual, but hers is cold often twisted sexuality. Mavis's short sculptured red hair denies sexuality. She is the only sister with children. Iris's blue jeaned style suggests a free spirit. Mavis's simple, elegant clothes reflect the control she imposes on her life. These three women care deeply about each other. This rescues them from a spiritual wasteland. Iris resents the dresses Mavis buys her, but she wears one to a party where she hopes to make contacts for an acting job. Iris pretends a tolerant attitude about Gloria's misadventure. She begs Sidney not to tell Alton the truth so that Gloria may start a new life. Mavis genuinely tries to understand the ideas of Iris and her village friends. Perhaps Gloria had lived to

marry Alton; Mavis could have accepted his blackness. Parodous sisters serve individually and collectively to remind Sidney that fate offers him choice. The proper choice is for Sidney to abandon his flight and to become once again a leader in the cause of justice. The Parodous sisters also change and influence events and they have small victories. Iris secures a job as a Golden Girl permanent model. Gloria has the fortitude to quit being hooker, even if she cannot cope with the outside world. Mavis questions Sidney's business deals and Gloria's way of life.

Mavis' racial prejudice does not abolish her genuine humanity. At first seeing Fred as having a touch of the poet, Mavis was happy before they were married. Fred drove forty miles to see her and then drove forty miles back home in a decaying car. But after their marriage Fred became firm and ordinary. Their sexual appeal for each other faded and Fred took a mistress. Mavis is still grateful that he married her: "there was no rush at home to marry Mavis Parodous". (Hansberry, 1964: 109) So Mavis is trapped. "I take care of my boys. I shop and I worry about my sisters, it's a life". (Hansberry, 1964:111)She lacks a sense of self worth. Mavis is portrayed as a middle-class matron. She is the stereotype of the anxious gentile whose racial prejudice and narrow-mindedness come through in the simplest of conversations. Sidney and his friends enjoy many laughs at her expense. Yet it is Mavis who teaches him about courage. She has lived with the secret that her husband has supported a young mistress and illegitimate son for years. And she has made peace with the knowledge. Noting Sidney's shock, Mavis comments on his innocence: "Sometimes I think you kids down here [Greenwich Village] believe your own notions of what the rest of the human race like. There are no squares, Sidney. Believe me when I tell you, everybody is his own hipster". (Hansberry, 1964:108) Sidney can only salute this woman whose humanity and intellect he has ridiculed.

For Sidney organized religion satisfies no thirst in his spiritual and moral wasteland. His Jewish background mainly serves as a source of humour. He makes stock reference to his Jewish mother. Wally teases him about being a "nice middle class Jewish boy". (Hansberry, 1964:26) Mavis seems to need organized religion, as she bitterly says to Sidney and his guest, "where indeed might we look for it [understanding] . . . in this quite dreadful world, since you have got rid of god for us". (Hansberry, 1964:64) Sidney knows that Mavis's racism symbolizes middle class narrow-mindedness which intensifies man's isolation from his fellow man. Organized religion offers Sidney no real solution. The answer then lies within man himself. The man must explore the depths and heights of his own soul and mind to find meaning. Hansberry has involvement with other oppressed people also; Sidney fails to see his sister-in-law, Mavis, as anything other than "the mother middle class itself," (63) or to discover any positive traits in her. It is his righteous anger at her evident prejudice toward both Blacks and Jews, but especially toward Blacks. Sidney plays upon her well-known prejudice by telling her about a new suitor for her call girl sister, Gloria. He does not reveal the suitor's race until Mavis is greatly excited over the prospective groom. Our sympathy is with Sidney because Mavis's racism deserves such a blow when he introduces her to Alton, the suitor who appears to be white and then chooses the most uncomfortable moment to reveal his race. He clearly portrayed as having gone too far for Sidney's own prejudice arises in justifiable hate of racism. But it becomes distorted when it leads him to mistake this particular flaw in a person for the whole person. Sidney makes his embarrassing exposure to Mavis that; he, Alton, and Iris "variously concentrate on the food and exchange superior and rather childish glances, letting her live through the moment of discomfort". (Hansberry, 1964: 62-3)

Sidney finally sees beyond the stereotype in which he has enclosed Mavis. He realizes that she too has a measure of awareness, sensitivity and integrity and would like to improve herself. He realizes that her ideals and goals are not as different from his own as he had previously believed. One new perception that enables him to draw nearer to her is his awareness that she too has come from a

rich ethnic background. Mavis reveals to Sidney that when she was young, her father staged Greek tragedies in their home with all the family taking part. She reveals her sensitive awareness of many of her weaknesses and limitations. She also reveals her courage in facing her husband's infidelity and the fact that he has an illegitimate son and her longing to reach a highest level of thinking than she believes she is capable of. These revelations help in changing Sidney's view about Mavis. He increases his respect for her and by his pain that she remains unable to surpass her limitations. His realization is a step on his tortuous and often distressing path toward self-discovery and a fuller understanding of the world around him. The realization helps him to make his final assertion that "the earth turns and men change every day and that rivers run and people wanna be better than they are". (Hansberry, 1964:142) His ability to make this assertion is his triumph. Hansberry assesses the problems involved in overcoming inter-ethnic hostilities and creating a workable multi-ethnic society. She knew the complexity and agony in such a struggle. He is also enchanted by his wife, Iris's boldly cosmic performance of a dance that illustrates her mixed ethnic background: "She snakes out promptly, hissing, in the dance steps of the Greek Miserlou which turns into a jig and then into the usual stereotyped notion of some Indian war dance concluding with a Marilyn Monroe Freeze". (Hansberry, 1964:28-9)

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