

Tutorial letter 202/2/2016

**Colonial and Postcolonial African
Literatures**

ENG2603

Semesters 2

Department of English Studies

IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

This tutorial letter contains important information
about your module.

BAR CODE

Dear Student

Assignment 02, Question 1

Read the excerpt below and answer the question that follows.

Lindner: Well, you see our community is made up of people who've worked hard ... 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 ... But you've got to admit that a man, right or wrong, has the right to want to have the neighbourhood he lives in a certain kind of way. And at the moment the overwhelming majority of our people ... feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of a community, when they share a common background. I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Cybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities. (p.90)

In view of what Mr Lindner says in the passage quoted above, write an essay of about 1500 words where you discuss and show how the Younger family experienced and resisted the racism prevalent in their society.

The abolition of slavery in the American society did not necessarily bring the anticipated outcomes such as equality and justice. And the subsequent introduction of the Jim Crow laws which encouraged inequality, discrimination, and marginalisation of black people made sure that black people did not have equal access to education and employment opportunities. This implies that black people were only given the lowest paying jobs and better jobs were reserved for white people. So the challenges of racism and gender inequality which are also depicted in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* were prominent features in American society. In view of the above description of the American society as depicted in *A Raisin in the Sun*, this essay will discuss how the Younger family experienced and resisted the racism prevalent in the American society.

Racism dictated that black people and white people in America stay in separate communities. While black people were living in extreme poverty and ghettos, many white people were enjoying luxurious lives. In these white communities, black people were not allowed to stay because they were seen as subhuman and animals. Considering the hatred many white people had for blacks, one surely understands Mrs Johnson when she expressed her fears about the Youngers' moving to the white community that "You mean you ain't read 'bout them coloured people that was bombed out their place?" (Hansberry, 2011: 75).

The mere fact that Mrs Johnson came to warn the Youngers about the hostile and unwelcoming nature of white communities especially to black people, mirrors America as a polarized nation. The bombing of Negro families after they had moved to a white community recounts the extent to which racism could go in making sure that black people do not mingle with their white counterparts. In supporting her story of a bombed Negro family, Mrs Johnson showed the Youngers the newspaper headlines which were written "NEGROES INVADE CLYBOURNE PARK- BOMBED" (Hansberry, 2011: 76).

Taking cognizance of the hostility of white communities toward accepting black people to stay in their mix, Mr Lindner's move to negotiate with the Youngers so that they do not move to Clybourne Park is not shocking. Mr Lindner's politeness that "[...] feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of a community, when they share a common background" (ibid: 90) tells that black people were not welcomed in Clybourne Park. In further elaborating his assertion, Lindner concluded by saying "[...] as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities" (Ibid: 90). Mr Lindner in the above quotation implies that it is not natural for Negroes to stay together with white people. He is also advising the Youngers to reconsider their move to Clybourne Park.

In spite of the attempts to prevent the Youngers from moving to Clybourne Park, a white community, the Youngers do not seem to be shaken by threats and what befell a Negro family that moved to Clybourne Park. The Youngers resisted all those threats as Walter showed no respect when he turned down Mr Lindner's offer that "Never mind how I feel- you got any more to say 'bout how people ought to sit down and talk to each other?...Get out of my house man." (Hansberry, 2011: 91). The above quotation explains the Youngers' reluctance to cancel their move to the house they bought in Clybourne Park.

Moreover, after Walter had called Lindner, everyone in the family thought Walter was going to accept the offer. Undoubtedly, Lindner shared the same thoughts as well. But, Walter's turning down again of Lindner's offer could be perceived not only as resistance of racism, but also as a way of showing pride. In showing the family's pride, Walter told Lindner that "We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes- but we will try to be good neighbours. That's all we got to say. We don't want your money" (Hansberry, 2011: 116). And the Youngers seem to have been eagerly awaiting their moment to move to their new house in Clybourne Park. This enthusiasm is detected in Ruth's words when she says "Well, for God's sake- if the moving men are here- LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!" (Hansberry, 2011: 116).

In conclusion, racism underpinned by segregation laws seemed to have divided the American society. It also encouraged white people to perceive black people as subhuman. This perception fuelled the attitudes of many white people by preventing them from accepting black people in their communities, as well as denying them education and employment opportunities. Regardless of racism, the Younger family vowed to resist racism as they turned down the offer made by white people so that they do not occupy the house they bought in Clybourne Park, a white community. In view of the polemics in this essay, one can safely claim that as much as the Youngers have experienced racism in the American society, they have also resisted it.

Although critics have privileged the interpretations of *Nervous Conditions* that focus on and emphasise gender struggles, the class and racial narratives of the novel can be said to be the ones through which the gender struggles are mediated."

Bibliography

Hansberry, Lorraine. (2011). *A Raisin in the Sun*. London: Methuen Drama Student Edition.

OR

***Seven Steps to Heaven* by Fred Khumalo**

Read the statement below and answer the question that follows.

The women in *Seven Steps to Heaven* are largely presented as stereotypes and serve only to provide emotional support and sexual gratification to the male characters.

With reference to three female characters in the novel discuss the validity of the above assertion.

The representation of women in literature can either foster women's conformity to stereotypes or resistance to stereotyping or a simultaneous conformity and resistance that opens up avenues of engaging the text from multiple theoretical perspectives. This assignment required you to demonstrate a basic understanding of what a stereotype is and the role of stereotyping as a narratological practice in constructing fixed identities of women. You were then expected to argue whether the female characters in Fred Khumalo's *Seven Steps to Heaven* are represented as stereotypes or whether they enact a resistance to stereotyping, basing your argument on any three female characters in the novel. Your argument would depend largely on whether you agree or disagree with the given statement. However, your argument would be one-sided if you do not address, to some degree, the extent to which even supposedly stereotypical characters attempt to subvert dominant perceptions of their identities, whether in terms of gender, race, class or sexuality. Below is a basic run-down of some of the ideas you could have explored in your essay.

The study guide for this course (2015:vii) defines stereotyping as a "way of depicting characters by emphasising singular values and not taking into account that a single character may possess different views or subjectivities that can be revealed in different ways in response to different stimuli". This suggests that literature that represents women as stereotypes assigns to them specific traits and characteristics that supposedly define their identity as women. The gender implication is that women behave in a particular way in particular circumstances and that their identities as women are already socially defined within specific contexts – from marriage to motherhood, sex to sexuality. A stereotypical female character conforms to predefined notions about women – their behaviour, actions and speech. These notions are made to manifest in the characters' interactions with other characters in the text. In *Seven Steps to Heaven*, the interactions of female characters such as Thembi, Nolitha and Lovey with male characters with whom they are sexually involved suggest that they are mere stereotypes whose role within the world of the text engender sexist notions that women exist mainly to provide emotional support and sexual gratification to men. One could argue that the fact that the novel is written from a male perspective further compounds this sexism. This essay shall elaborate on these arguments through an in-depth analysis of the representation of each of these female characters.

This is only a sample introduction. However you choose to introduce your essay, it must demonstrate your understanding of the concept of stereotyping and your main argument with regards to the stereotyping of women in the novel. Almost all the female characters are stereotyped in one way or another. It is up to you to find evidence from the text to support your arguments. Bear in mind that the characters can be stereotyped by both the male characters in the novel and by the author's style of narration.

Nolitha is the stereotype of the sexually vulnerable, ignorant village girl whose sexuality is exploited by two young men – Sizwe and Thulani – for both their own sexual gratification and the validation of their manhood. Your discussion on Nolitha should highlight the ways in which her sexual encounter with Sizwe and Thulani in the bush constructs her as an object of male sexual desire. The objectification of her body and exploitation of her sexuality combine to project her as a victim of male sexual violence (violence not in a physical sense but in a metaphoric sense of sexual domination). Nolitha's identity is constructed as fixed, because given her lack of education and underprivileged background she cannot escape sexual exploitation. Such stereotyping positions women not only as victims but also as mere objects on which masculine power is exercised and validated.

Mrs Tembe is the stereotype of a devoted wife who channels all her energies into caring for the physical needs of her husband and providing him with emotional support in the execution of his duties as a religious minister. There is ample evidence in the text to support this assertion. Look at how Mrs Tembe is always serving tea or beer to her husband and his friends and constantly encouraging him in his pastoral work. It is almost as if she exists only to please him. Even when it is known publicly that the pastor has reneged on his responsibilities to his family, Mrs Tembe still tries to cover up his atrocities in the eyes of the community. The novel stereotypes her as a 'good' and 'morally upright' woman, irrespective of the circumstances in which she finds herself. It is only later in the story that we begin to see her subverting these fixed notions of her identity as the pastor's wife by suppressing feelings of guilt about the pastor's departure and thinking more of herself and her wellbeing than his.

Lovey is the stereotype of the shebeen queen whose only value lies in her physical beauty and her sexual appeal. She is also a "home-wrecker" and a "husband-snatcher", a destroyer of men and their assumed stable family lives. Explore the ways in which Lovey is depicted as a sexual object to both the pastor and Mr Dube, in much the same way that Nolitha is a sexual toy to both their sons. That Lovey insists on sending the pastor back to his family after a month of sexual indulgence does not exonerate her of guilt as a home-wrecker since the pastor still abandons his marriage and takes off to start his new life without his wife and son.

Thembi is the stereotype of a 'coconut' – a black middle-class girl trying to be white. This is evident in her speech, dressing and relationships. Her adoption of American dress styles of baggy jeans and American slang language connote images of a social deviant who at once conforms to norms of deviant behaviour. Her relationship with Patrick McGuinness is symptomatic of her desire to erase her blackness while pandering a white identity. As privileged as she is, she is still depicted as dependent on Patrick for money to buy clothes and personal effects. This is a stereotypical portrayal of women, one that is problematic because it positions men as providers and therefore the custodians of financial power.

However you argue your points, you must acknowledge that some of the female characters in the novel are not depicted as stereotypes; rather, they defy stereotyping by their actions, dressing or speech. For example, Mrs Dube is portrayed as a character who defies the stereotype of women as physically weak. She is aggressive, violent and assertive. She beats up her husband and is physically strong enough to stand her ground against any man. However, the masculinization of the character is itself a stereotypical practice based on the notion that women can only be assertive if they are violent.

Sheree le Roux can also be said to challenge the stereotype of a lesbian by the way she dresses, walks and talks. She sidesteps fixed constructions of lesbian identity, if one goes by what she tells Sizwe when they meet for the first time.

There is a wealth of literature on the stereotyping of women in literature and the gender implications of this, which you could use to buttress your arguments. Quoting from secondary sources is an important way of situating your essay within a body of existing literature, but it is also important that you quote substantially from the text to illustrate your arguments.