

Tutorial Letter 202/1/2015

Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures

ENG2603

Semester 1

Department of English Studies

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

This tutorial letter contains important pre-examination information and feedback on Assignment 02.

BAR CODE

Dear students

The following material is for your feedback on the assignments you submitted for the module. In the main, we are excited by the learning potential displayed by your responses. We encourage you to continuously engage with the texts in meaningful ways.

We have decided to provide you with as much feedback as possible by writing the responses as bona fide essays. You will notice that what we encourage you to use textual evidence to buttress your responses. So, for instance, in the example of *A Raisin in the Sun*, it makes little difference to write circularly about the theme of 'dreams' in the play without providing concrete textual evidence through direct quotations to substantiate your argument. This is critical, as it allows the marker to see the extent of your critical engagement with the text you had chosen to answer. It is critical, too, to use the e-reserves to augment and expand your understanding of a text as seen through the eyes of scholars. Only by engaging with academics' publications can you broaden your horizons. Over-reliance on Internet sources which are not vetted by academics and which, for the most part, are notoriously ill-informed and of dubious intellectual merit is unacceptable.

Please go through the feedback material as another avenue in your learning curve. We hope you will engage with this material meaningfully, and do ask questions regarding any aspect of these responses that you do not understand.

PRE-EXAMINATION PREPARATION

Your examinations are scheduled for June/July and October/November of this academic year. Please consult myUnisa for any updates on your examination dates.

The examination paper is composed of two sections: **Section A** and **Section B**. Each section will contain **two questions**. You must answer **ONE question from SECTION A** and **ONE question from SECTION B**. You may **NOT** answer two questions from the same section. Please be clear on this matter: **ONE QUESTION FROM EACH SECTION**.

The questions will be based on the four prescribed texts: *Nervous Conditions*, *Raisin in the Sun*, *Seven Steps to Heaven* and the prescribed poems from *The New Century of South African Poetry*. These questions are distributed across the two sections of the exam paper. There are no compulsory questions in this exam and you are free to write on any text you are comfortable writing on as long as you answer one question from each section of the exam paper.

It is imperative, in order to pass the examination, that you **READ ALL THE TEXTS** that are prescribed for this module. Do not try to "spot" for the exam as this leads to under-preparedness and may seriously harm your chances of successfully passing the module. It is important for students to be thoroughly prepared for the examination. You must neither try to guess which books will have easier questions, nor try to reproduce content from the assignment questions from earlier in the semester. This strategy is unlikely to yield positive results. We therefore urge you to read the texts as thoroughly as you can. It is also very important that you read and engage with as much of the e-reserve materials for each text as you possibly can. This is an essential part of your examination preparation. You are expected to be familiar with all the important concepts that are discussed in the Study Guide and be familiar with the key concerns of each text.

Please remember that your final mark for this module is determined by a combination of your semester mark (25%) and your exam mark (75%). The semester mark is calculated from your two assignments and counts for 25% of your final mark, while the mark you will have obtained in the examination itself counts for 75% of the overall mark. It is thus important that you assiduously work at your assignments as well as prepare for the examination.

We wish you the best in your endeavours!

The ENG2603 Team.

ASSIGNMENT 02

***A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry**

OR

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

DUE DATE: 7 April 2015

Answer ONE of the following questions.

***A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry**

In a carefully worded essay, discuss the aspect of 'race' as a hindrance to the aspirations of the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The role played by race in frustrating the ambitions of the various members of the Younger family in Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* cannot be ignored. To fully understand how race is implicated in hindering the aspirations of the Younger family, it is appropriate to begin by briefly defining the term itself. While the concept of race has been defined and conceptualized in many ways and from different perspectives, this discussion utilizes the definition of race that denotes a population of humans who are classified on the basis of certain biological characteristics that differentiate them from other human groups (Marger, 1991:19). The basis of this classification is physical appearance, where anatomical features, such as skin colour, hair texture, and body and facial shape are the signifiers of difference (Marger, 1991:20). It is this definition of the concept, (that authorizes categorizations of people as Blacks, Whites, Coloreds, etc.) that best captures the racial identity of the Younger family in the play and the obstacles that the members encounter as they endeavor to realize their aspirations. As Blacks, in an American society, whose social conventions, discriminated against people of their race, the Younger family is marginalized – they are excluded from some of the rights that are enjoyed by the Whites in whose favour, the social, political and economic systems operate. Thus the aspirations of the younger family are an attempt to attain the dignity, pride and the sense of fulfillment that exist outside of the restrictive spaces imposed by racial imbalances.

In the better part of the play, racial politics constitutes the dormant background against which the Younger family sets to achieve their dreams. Passing statements from members of the Younger family, such as 'Walter Lee say coloured folks not getting anywhere until they start gambling' (25) and 'Talk about old fashioned Negroes' (85) point to the unpleasant stereotypes against which black lives are constructed. In fact, the underlying cause of the conflicts among members of the Younger family can be located in racial imbalances – they clash in their attempts to get part of the ten thousand dollars from Mama's check because they believe it will enable them to realize their aspirations which have been frustrated by years of being racially discriminated. These conflicts, which among other things appear in the form of divergent dreams, reveal the horror of how the negation of being constructed through racial stereotypes forces black people to fight among themselves for few resources. For instance, the constant clashes between Walter and Beneatha exemplify how the atmosphere of discontentment caused by race has negatively affected relations in the family:

Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing' round with sick people – then go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet ...
(22)

It is ironical that, in the quotation above where Walter, who is also a victim of uneven race relations within his society, deploys a racially charged tone to condescend on and construct Beneatha into a woman. Beneatha's situation shows that the African American woman is in a double-jeopardy because she has to grapple with the racism that is generally experienced by people of her colour (both male and female) and, at the same time, challenge the black patriarchy.

Actually, Walter seems to have been extremely traumatized by the way race has been used to defer his ambitions. One of his exchanges with George Murchison highlights the distress:

And you – ain't you bitter, man? Ain't just about had it yet? Don't you see no stars gleaming that you can't reach out and grab? You happy? – you contented son-of-bitch-you happy? You got it made? Bitter? Man, I'm a volcano. Bitter? I am a giant – surrounded by ants! Ants who can't even understand what is that the giant is talking about. (62)

The outburst reflects Walter's impatience and bitterness at being unable to fulfil his ambitions in life. But the eruption should not be oversimplified as an unchecked quest to acquire wealth or a rash desire to attain a higher status in life. It is a symptom of the mental strain that racial restrictions inflict on an individual. Walter is almost neurotic because this scene comes after yet another incident in which he confesses to Mama that he 'want[s] so many things that they are driving me [him] kind of crazy ...'. (52)

The incident that brings the latent racial prejudices to the surface is the one that involves Mr Lindner, the representative of the Clybourne Improvement Association, a white neighbourhood where Mama has bought a house to fulfil a lifelong dream that she shared with her now deceased husband, of getting decent accommodation for the family. Mr Lindner is sent to dissuade the Youngers from moving into their new house in Clybourne, because the area is only restricted to white residents. He makes the following statement:

... And at the moment the overwhelming majority of our people out there feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of the 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 Clybourne 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. (90)

Although it is not officially the law's stipulation, the incident reveals a society afflicted by deep-seated racial bigotries and imbalances. Even the much hyped check of ten thousand dollars, that the Younger family believed would result in the fulfilment of their dreams, cannot solve racial prejudices whose seriousness is further accentuated when Mr Lindner reminds the Youngers of the previous acts of violence committed against Blacks who had moved into areas that are dominated by Whites. He makes the point obliquely as follows:

I am sure that you people must be aware of some of the incidents which have happened in various parts of the city when coloured people have moved into certain areas ... Well – because we have what I think is going to be a unique type of organisation in American community life – not only do we deplore that kind of thing – but we are trying to do something about it. We feel ... most trouble exists because people don't sit down and talk to each other (89).

At once, the emergence of this 'visible' and 'active' racial barrier towards the denouement of the play forces the audience to revisit and rethink the significance of the conflicts and dreams around the check. This development is ironic; in a way it suggests that the Youngers should focus on fighting racism rather than quarrelling about how to spend the check. Furthermore, this indirectly indicts Walter, who initially is intent on accepting the money from Lindner at the expense of his racial pride and dignity:

I'm going to feel fine, Mama. I'm going to look that son-of-a-bitch in the eyes and say ... 'All right, Mr Lindner ... that's your neighbourhood out there. You have the right to keep it like you want. Just write the cheque and – the house yours.' And I am going to say ... you people just put the money in my hand and you won't have to live next to this bunch of stinking niggers. Maybe ... I'll get down on my black knees... (112)

Walter's intention to accept Mr Lindner's proposal to give the Youngers money so as to stop them from moving into their new house abets racial imbalances. But in the end, Mama makes him understand the evolvment of the family identity over generations and how this should help the Youngers deal with the racial prejudices that they are currently encountering. In an emotional and yet telling incident, Mama chastises him as follows:

Son – I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecropper – but ain't nobody in my family never let anybody pay'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't that poor. (*Raising her eyes and looking at him.*) We ain't been that dead inside. (111)

Mama's reprimand, as evident in the above quotation, is located in the history and experiences of the family; it underscores the need to maintain one's racial pride in pursuit of one's aspirations. Her words pertinently disclose the humble source of the fortitude that enabled the previous generations of her family to survive the humiliations of racism.

In conclusion, the characters in the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, struggle to break out of the restrictions imposed by racial prejudices. Racial discrimination, as my discussion has highlighted, creates tensions in the different facets of the lives of those that it prejudices. Without boldly challenging the uneven race relations of their society, the Younger family cannot accomplish most of their dreams. Their movement into the new house at the end of the play is an example of a dream realized because of the principled stand that they collectively take to challenge racial segregation and the humiliations surrounding it.

Bibliography

Hansberry, L . 2011. *A Raisin in the Sun*. London: Bloomsbury.

Marger, M.N. 1991. *Race and Ethnic Relations: American and Global Perspectives*. Wordsworth Publishing Company: Belmont

Prepared by

Dr R. A. Musvoto
musvora@unisa.ac.za
(012) 429 6342

Seven steps to heaven by Fred Khumalo

Carefully read the following passage and discuss the importance of Freedom Cele's thoughts during his flight from Lanseria Airport to the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

Freedom Cele, like many of the men, had never been aboard an aeroplane in his life. Sitting in his own comfortable chair now, sipping from a can of beer and chewing on strips of biltong, he felt like a king, floating in the deep blue skies, floating to the destiny of the unencumbered man like he was. But every now and then, he wondered what awaited him at the other end. Now and then his other persona, Thulani Tembe, would try to take over, asking questions about where Sizwe Dube was at the moment, how he was coping, but the dominant Freedom soon wrested control from Thulani, putting himself at the centre stage, cracking jokes with colleagues. What a simple straight-talking guy, they told each other (2007:191).

Contrary to the assumption encapsulated in the last sentence of the passage, that is, "What a simple straight-talking guy, they told each other", Freedom Cele is complex and layered. He is a man with superior inventive powers and creative capabilities. He has created a persona for himself whom he inhabits, as and when necessary. But now, far from the flights of fancy that make his stories acquire a lofty quality above others, he was literally above the skies, "floating to the destiny of the unencumbered man like he was". The importance of this single moment in an aeroplane, in which he is perfectly ensconced like a "king", is that he is able to vacillate between Thulani Tembe and Freedom Cele, further to think about Sizwe Dube. The three characters constitute the writing vortex, as it were, from which creativity springs. Students would do well to remember here the significance of the novel *The Oneness of Two in Three*, which alludes to this trio. An analysis of the passage, therefore, has to pay particular attention to the titular significance of the novel-within-the novel, on the one hand, and the multiplicity of the characters to which the passage alludes.

Noting that Sizwe Dube always has Thulani on his mind and even sees him in the mirror during his bar jaunts, it is noteworthy that Sizwe sees Thulani as an inconveniently inalienable part of himself. He wishes to escape him but cannot: he is the source of his writing brilliance; yet, ironically, he is also the source of his writer's block and dipsomania. This, more than anything else, attests to the fact of their "oneness". In fact, when Sizwe publishes Thulani's stories and hopes to use a nom de plume of Vusi Mntungwa to own their literary life, he repeats what Thulani Tembe does when he adopts Freedom Cele, picking up Swords, not Words that Sizwe uses. The Anagram of SWORDS and WORDS is relevant here, in view of the trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo that will ultimately render him a prisoner in Zimbabwe as a "dog of war". The narrator deliberately plays on the words 'dog' and sword, with an intention to show the slippery nature of the order of things. Thrice in the novel the narrator writes Dog backward as God, in the fashion of a palindrome.

Ultimately, the passage relates to the understanding of *Seven Steps to Heaven* as a multi-layered text with characters that are as multiple as they are multi-layered themselves. Here the recurring leitmotif of "if I made soup..." carries a sense of hold, in that it signposts that "people are like onions"; indeed Freedom Cele is like an onion with Thulani Tembe beneath him, inasmuch as Sizwe Dube has Vusi Mntungwa and Freedom Cele lurking beneath him. Up in the clouds, "Thulani Tembe, would try to take over, asking questions about where Sizwe Dube was at the moment, and how he was coping, but Freedom would wrest control". On the ground, likewise, Sizwe was looking for Thulani Tembe. The whole schemata of multiplicity therefore becomes manifest in this passage. The student's response will have to show why it is important that Freedom Cele does not reach the DRC, especially for the possibility of Sizwe meeting Thulani through the prospects of a firing squad in Zimbabwe.

References

Khumalo, Fred (2007) *Seven Steps to Heaven*. Jacana: Sunnyside

Prepared by

Prof K Masemola
masemk@unisa.ac.za
(012) 429 2298