

GHETTOS AND BAAGS: A QUEST FOR SOCIAL SPACE

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Abstract: The two diametrically opposite faces of the American reality, viz, prosperity and adversity, are sharply juxtaposed in many a classic. The pathetic existence of the coloured in ghettos is the outcome of racial prejudices. The 'baags' in India, on the other hand, offer refuge to the hapless Parsees who constitute the underprivileged class in the otherwise affluent Zoroastrian community. In the ultimate analysis, the ghettos and the 'baags' emerge as potent symbols of degradation and deprivation. Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* and Rohinton Mistry's *Tales From Firozsha Baag* offer insightful images of the black predicament and the Parsee dilemma respectively.

Key Words: decadent, impoverished, microcosm, proletarian, quandary, segregation, xenophobic.

One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. - Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream" The seemingly glittering life and the ghettos project the two sides of American life – the opulent and the ominous. The blacks who live in ghettos lead a miserable life which is the upshot of social segregation and discrimination on the basis of the colour of the skin. The 'baags' in India, on the other hand, are institutions built by charitable Parsees for the not-so-affluent Zoroastrians. This paper seeks to examine how ghettos and baags emerge in the ultimate analysis, however symbolically, as vortexes which offer no hope. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Tales From Firozsha Baag* by Rohinton Mistry, an exponent of diasporic experience, are the cases in point. I Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is an imaginative interpretation of black American Life which poignantly addresses the concern of housing for the blacks in the white-dominated U.S. Hansberry, a young black, highlights the predicament of a working class Chicago's Southside ghetto family in the late forties and the early fifties. Though the Hansberry's were as affluent as their white neighbours, their black skin stood as a barrier and hence their identification with the predominantly black community surrounding them made superior education impossibility.

Speaking of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine observed in a letter to her mother:

"Mama, it is a play that tells the truth about people, Negroes and life and I think it will help a lot of people to understand how we are just as complicated as they are – and just as mixed up – but above all, that we have among our miserable and downtrodden ranks, people who are the very essence of human dignity. That is what, after all the laughter and tears, the play is supposed to say. I hope it will make you very proud" (109).

Since the First World War, there has been a steady and gradual exodus of blacks from the impoverished cotton fields and stagnating villages of the rural South to the industrial epicenter, the North. Thus came into existence the ghettos. The Negro ghetto is a uniquely urban phenomenon. In the rural South, the blacks co-existed with the whites but were, by and large, dependent upon them for their economic and physical well-being. The opportunity for separate community development was rather remote. Rural blacks had their own churches, lodges and social clubs, but for other services, they were compelled to rely on the inadequate, segregated facilities provided by the white establishments, welfare agencies and recreational organizations. Not until the blacks began to move to the cities of the North did they begin to form cohesive communities with their own business, civic and welfare institutions. The southern blacks who flocked to Chicago to work in the packing houses and steel mills during the wartime boom found an already well-developed black enclave on the Southside. Negroes were systematically excluded from the white localities of the city. They were handicapped in the choice of jobs and were barred from places of public accommodation. As an aggressive response to their deteriorating status, they had developed separate institutions for themselves. As an intellectually sensitive creative writer, Hansberry does not attempt to conceal her proletarian sympathies.

In a letter to one of her friends, she wrote:

"We must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us; not only have our dreams, as Mama said, but our very bodies. It is not an abstraction to us that the average American Negro has a life expectancy of five to ten years less than the average white. You see, Miss Oehler, that is murder and a Negro writer cannot be expected to share the placid view of the situation that might be the case with a white writer" (131-32).

The Youngers live without hope in a crowded dingy apartment of the Negro South-side in Chicago. The

filth and the unhygienic environment stifle the young and the old alike. The intellectual curiosity of Beneatha and the wild imagination of Walter suffer a setback as the conditions at home prove oppressive. Life becomes a veritable hell as the four walls of the house crowd into, ready to crush their spirit. Frequent bickerings and resentment with the sort of life they are forced to lead, push the Youngers to the brink of a nervous breakdown. Lena Younger, an archetype of the black matriarch, acts as a unifying force by instilling pride, integrity and traditional values in her children. It is she who emphasizes the need for self-assertion.

She tells Walter Lee, her son once:

“I’m waiting to hear how you be your father’s son. Be the man he was I’m waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy” (347)

Walter is a frustrated man as he is duped by Willy, his partner in business. Beneatha, her daughter, on the other hand, is a disillusioned romantic. However the diverse familial strands are woven together and integrity is sustained by Lena. *A Raisin in the Sun* derives its essence from “Book of Proverbs” in the Old Testament: “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick”. Hansberry employs raisin as the central metaphor in the play for a cherished desire or dream. Just as raisins lose their succulence due to overdrying in the sun, the Youngers almost give up hope as their dream of a decent accommodation remains unfulfilled. Lena’s resolution in favour of a house in Clybourne Park, a white neighbourhood, is received with skepticism. Ultimately it is her iron will that sees them through. The analogy between Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and *A Raisin in the Sun* is too obvious to be ignored. Both the works are set in Chicago’s Southside. The white society is akin to a ‘cage’ in both and the two works even begin with the same sound - the ringing of an alarm clock.

Chinua Achebe, the noted African novelist, observes:

“Suffering should be creative, should give birth to something good and lovely” (95)

A Raisin in the Sun has its deep roots in Hansberry’s suffering which ennobled her. Commenting on the theme of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Isaac Sequeria observes:

“The neighbourhood problems faced by black families moving into white areas are presented sympathetically yet trenchantly by Lorraine Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The hypocrisy of the Clybourne community preaching love and understanding, while really striving to keep the blacks out, is conveyed adroitly through the conversation of Mr. Lindner and the Youngers” (48)

Though some of their dreams are deferred, the play ends on a note of hope. The Youngers move into their new house in the white dominated milieu, ready to face challenges. They learn to live with dignity and

pride, ready to prove that they are second to none in ethics and social values. The play’s suggestive ending—a hope that they will ultimately be accepted into the fold on their merits—reflects Hansberry’s innate interest in la condition humaine. *A Raisin in the Sun* is contemporary, topical and is in harmony with the prevailing black American quest for social space. A similar experience is discernable in Parsees’ life in India. In *Tales From Firozsha Baag*, Rohinton Mistry offers a series of vignettes of Parsee life in a ‘Baag’. Discussing the creation of ‘baags’, Geeta Doctor observes:

“There is no ghettoization of Parsis as such, though by custom, the Parsis have built themselves into ‘Baags’ or small enclosed communities of residential housing donated by philanthropic Parsis for less advantaged members of their community. The gold fish bowl syndrome of life in a baag is therefore a common theme of these accounts of Parsi life” (44).

Khodabad building is the place of action in Mistry’s first novel, *Such a Long Journey* whereas *Firozsha Baag* is the locale in eight of the tales in *Tales From Firozsha Baag*. Mistry offers a microcosm of the decadent Parsee life in the postcolonial era. Speaking of the need for ‘baags’, Roshan Shahani raises a pertinent point:

“In the postcolonial period, especially the community feels its vantage point threatened, its cultural importance challenged, even its economic superiority eroded. In this context, the ‘baag’ becomes the community refuge, a bulwark against a fast changing city which appears increasingly menacing. Within the ‘baag’ are the ties that bind- the neighbourliness, the common language, the common customs - without, is the deluge. Mistry does not endorse this exclusiveness, often he is seen to laugh at it; but he understands the need for it, even while he shows its stultifying effects”

Shahani’s argument throws enough light on the need of the Parsee community to have ‘baags’ in a city like Bombay. A ‘baag’ is a regimented world within a world which offers security. It is cut off from the stark realities of Indian life. In the words of Nilufer Bharucha, *Firozsha Baag* stands ‘half-way between upper class world of Sidhwa and Desai and Dhondy’s *Sarabatwala Chowk*’ (84-85).

Conclusion: The blacks and the Parsees share a common quandary but with a difference. If the blacks are left with no choice but to live in ghettos, the Parsees opt for ‘baags’ of their own volition. The ghettos and the ‘baags’ differ radically from the green and pleasant islands of the British which were labeled ‘golden ghettos’ by Lapierre and Collins (14). The Parsees in general and the Parsees in post-independence India in particular, shut themselves out from the mainstream Indian life. They live in a

self-imposed exile. The existence in 'baags' is one of degradation. Rather xenophobic, they lead an insular life in which socio-cultural paradigms of Zoroastrian worldview are accorded due priority. The blacks, on

the other hand, are an impoverished lot for whom a house remains a dream deferred. Hence their protracted existence in ghettos.

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