

# Progressing Hope for Freedom in Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs*

## OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 9

Special Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2020

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Impact Factor: 4.110

Citation:  
Vinodhini, S., and  
SP Sasi Rekha.  
"Progressing Hope for  
Freedom in Lorraine  
Hansberry's *Les  
Blancs*." *Shanlax  
International Journal of  
English*, vol. 9, no. S1,  
2020, pp. 25–28.

DOI:  
[https://doi.  
org/10.34293/english.  
v9iS1-Dec2020.3686](https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v9iS1-Dec2020.3686)

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Hansberry through her plays tried to bring about a determined awareness about desire and hope. She was highly conscious of her responsibility as a writer and found drama as a suitable medium to explore what she truly felt. Finding the truth of self and expressing it fearlessly and forcefully became her prime concern. A discussion of Hansberry's gaining of knowledge, contentment, a feeling of sameness with the community, her development to an established writer has to begin with a look at her childhood, education and the influences on her. She belonged to an aristocratic black family. She had inherited the natural drive and talent of her remarkable family. She gained confidence and renewed zest for life from her father Carl Hansberry. Chicago was one of the nation's most segregated northern cities, the races kept apart by restrictive covenants that prevented blacks from buying homes in white neighborhoods'.

A person's identity formation and development begin with his relation with his mother. Usually Negro mothers kept their children, especially the gifted and questioning ones away from competitions with whites and tried to keep them in their place. Influenced by her mother Lorraine took special interest in her community. Her mother Nanny Perry Hansberry was a former teacher and Republican ward committee woman. She was loving and passionate. She made a lifelong impression on Hansberry. She used to take her children to their Grandmother Perry's home in Tennessee. Lorraine listened to her mother and grandmother speaks of their earlier times in rolling hills in a place called Kentucky. She heard how her grandfather Perry had run away and hidden from his master in the beautiful hills there. His mother had wandered into the moon light and left food for him in hidden places. 'one question continued to haunt young Lorraine: what might a 'master' be?' [Robert Nemiroff, *To Be Young Gifted and Black* 51].

Many years later she was to answer this question in her play *The Drinking Gourd*. Lorraine admired her sister Mamie Hansberry who was her role model. By the time she was fourteen, she had an

enduring set of attitudes molded from her parents' values. Thus her educated parents and other family members exerted a strong influence in the creation of a feeling of personal and group identity in her. She speaks of her childhood days with great concern and love. She was free of the systematic restriction that the blacks faced. From her family she learned that she was a descendant of a proud race, and she must never betray the race or the family.

Her own strong desire made her to write on strong desire on freedom with element of hope. Human society is the most unique and exceptional, stable and an organic combination of multiple groups. Alain Locke in "Harlem Renaissance" claims, "Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another" (5). All sorts of social and personal relationships among communities and nations are regulated by the exercise of power. A great deal of human life coexists between power on one side and powerlessness on the other. When power designs the special categories and moral conscience of the society, the state of powerlessness testifies the existence of the subordinate or marginalized group. To quote Rollo May again, "innocence is also a condition of powerlessness" (200).

Les Blancs is Lorraine Hansberry's heroic social vision, "urging the need for dialogue and immediate action between the oppressed and the oppressor" (469) says Joy Abell. Hansberry's former husband Robert Nemiroff completed the notes and published the play on 1970. The play portrays the power of resistance of Africans against the horrors of colonial and racial violence exercised by the Europeans. Les Blancs received an international acclaim for examining the multi-dimensional impacts of colonialism and racism. Robert Nemiroff remembers the comments of the scholars that Les Blancs is a "visceral response to Jean Genet's celebrated play" (Nemiroff 32). Hansberry takes a neutral stand and portrays her people as a fusion of good and evil, fear and courage, confrontation and conviction, valour and fear, indifference and involvement.

The action of the play takes place in Zatambe, a small tribal African village, one of the colonies of European settlers. The native boy Tshembe Matoseh, an intellectual and English-educated, returns to homeland to attend his father's funeral, Old Abioseh, the Kwi warrior. He meets his two brothers Abioseh and Eric and discusses the colonial affairs. A shocking revelation reaches him in the form of Abioseh who turns out to be a Catholic priest favouring the whites. Abioseh is of the opinion that the people of Zatambe can only be civilized by the whites. On the other hand, Eric extends his unconditional support for the native struggle. Tshembe encounters the ongoing revolt but refuses to be a part of it. His tribal community besieges him to lead the revolution against the settlers. Having left behind his English wife and European comforts, he is caught between his personal and racial identity which are intertwined.

The action shifts to the missionary hospital in Zatambe. Established by Reverend Neilsen the small hospital bestowed upon the natives spiritual and physical health. Mme. Neilsen, the aged widow of Reverend Neilsen, in the mission hospital is the foster-mother of Tshembe brothers. Along with Mme. Neilsen, there are few white doctors actively helping the needy in Zatambe.

Charlie Morris, a white journalist arrives at Zatambe to write about the freedom struggle. Throughout the play, the families of both whites and natives have been massacred. The freedom army forces Tshembe to lead the struggle like his father who has died for the same. Tshembe favours the African leader Amos Kumalo who believes in settling the racial issues through peaceful negotiation. The colonial government arrests Kumalo on false charges and the hope of Tshembe becomes bleak. Mme. Neilsen initiates the urgency of raging a war to regain justice and freedom for the natives. Tension mounts when Ntali, the native man who works in the missionary in the name of 'Peter' is betrayed by Abioseh. Ntali is shot dead by Major Rice, a white colonial officer. The climax of the play gets electrified when Tshembe kills his own brother Abioseh for his betrayal.

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Les Blancs is a psychological drama of a European intellectual protagonist Tshembe who stands to fight against colonialism. He faces numerous confrontations within him and outside. The play deals with his internal struggle between his commitment to the native freedom struggle and his desire to transcend his life away from the struggle. To Julius Lester, "Tshembe is suspended between the part of him rooted in Africa and the part of him which has set down roots, personal and cultural Europe" (27). Tshembe comes to his natives uncommitted and uninitiated which delay his involvement in the freedom struggle. Hansberry views that the severity of violence cause several injustices like racism, casteism, xenophobia, suppression of ethnic, religious and indigenous minorities.

At the climax of the play the call for the destruction recalls the words of Hobe Morrison, "conclusion seems to boil down to revolution and the ghetto slogan, 'kill whitey'" (Nemiroff 133). In case of Tshembe, the death of two intimate persons, Madame Neilsen, Abioseh and Peter torments him as he "throes back his head and emits an animal-like cry of grief" (128). The freedom army throws explosives. It is to be noted that the play ends with Tshembe's gradual awareness of responsibility and the awakening of his African consciousness. The play Les Blancs is a political play. The play reinforces the necessity of unified struggle on the part of the Africans to create a new Africa. It is this unity that Claude McKay also emphasises for the Negroes in America, "every other racial group in America is organized except Negroes. What Negroes need is political union for strength" (174). The play projects the unified protest of the African natives against the European invaders to gain freedom and justice through an amalgamated struggle. For every human being, the right to life is the fundamental one. Serving his purposes marks his existence. Yet the contemporary world affects this basic right. But hope cares him to the path of success.

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