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Significance of Religion in African American Literature and Culture

Religion can be defined as a strong belief in supernatural or divine powers that help explain humankind's existence in and relationship with the universe. Often times religion becomes associated with where one lives and is an integral part of one's culture. Due to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Africans were uprooted from their homelands and relocated to a new country, the United States. Not only were African American's subjected to lives of servitude and ridicule, but this displacement from their homeland caused them to seek peace through their preferred religious beliefs.

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon*, Cudjo Lewis shares his experience as a slave and voices his religious beliefs throughout his story. In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the religious beliefs of the characters act as a sub conflict within the play. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm X unfolds his personal narrative of how he went from a lawless maverick to a monumental minister of the church of Islam. Together, these three literary works cover the time span between 1859 and 1965. These works chronicle the trials and tribulations that African Americans had to face, and continue to face, as they search for religious freedom and acceptance in a country that supposedly values such freedoms.

Barracoon highlights Cudjo Lewis' experiences with slavery and how his time spent as a slave altered his religious beliefs. One of the first things Cudjo discusses with Hurston is his religious beliefs and how they compare to the ones he used to have in Africa. Hurston asks how

he was feeling to which he replies, “I thank God I on prayin’ groun’ in a Bible country” (Hurstons 18). Hurston was understandably intrigued by this statement and successfully got Cudjo to elaborate. Cudjo provides a brief explanation of what he believes is the main difference between God from his original African religion, Yoruba, and God from his new Christian religion:

Yeah, in Afficky we always know dere was a God; he name Alahua, but po’ Affickans we cain readee de Bible, so we doan know God got a Son. We ain’ ignorant – we jes doan know. Nobody doan tell us ‘bout Adam eatee de apple, we didn’t know de seven seals was sealee ‘gainst us. Our parents doan tell us dat. Dey didn’t tell us ‘bout de first days. No, dass a right. We jes doan know. (Hurstons 19)

Given this explanation, it would seem that Cudjo is accepting of the Christian religious beliefs that were exposed to him when he was taken to America. Later in *Barracoon* it is discovered that Cudjo’s religious beliefs were strong enough that he became the sexton of the Old Landmark Baptist Church, which he had helped build during the construction of Africatown.

As Cudjo gains respect within the Christian community as a sexton, it is obvious that, at times, he has trouble fully conforming to his new religious faith. Cudjo describes his mixed emotions during the Christian burial of his daughter:

We Christian people now, so we put our baby in de coffin and dey take her in de church, and everybody come look down in her face. Dey sing, ‘Shall We Meet Beyond De River.’ I been a member of de church a long time now, and I know de words of de song wid my mouth, but my heart it doan know dat. Derefo’ I sing inside me, ‘*O todo ah wah n-law yah-lee, owrran k-nee ra ra k-nee ro ro.*’ (Hurstons 74).

Cudjo's reflection on how he mourned the death of his daughter shows how he understood and accepted many parts of Christianity, but internally he maintained many of his original Yoruba beliefs.

Although Cudjo mourns his wife and children who have passed and he longs to touch African soil once more, he finds some semblance of peace through his religious beliefs. By the end of *Barracoon*, Hurston comes to an insightful conclusion about Cudjo's split religious beliefs, "I am sure that he does not fear death. In spite of his long Christian fellowship, he is too deeply pagan to fear death. But he is full of trembling awe before the alter of the past" (94). Hurston's observation shows how Cudjo was able to maintain his Yoruba beliefs while simultaneously practicing Christian beliefs.

Throughout his lifetime, Cudjo was able to blend his two religions together without gaining much negative attention for his beliefs. However, as racial tensions continued to rise in America, African American customs were not always celebrated or encouraged. In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the character Mama and her daughter, Beneatha, clash in their religious beliefs. Arguably, the two characters' religious differences act as more than just a side conflict within the drama. Early on in the drama Beneatha shows an atheistic point-of-view, "It's all a matter of ideas and God is just one idea I don't accept. It's not important...I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God – there is only man and it is *he* who makes miracles!" (Hansberry 51). Mama replies to this speech by slapping Beneatha across the face; she is noticeably disturbed by her daughter's lack of religious faith. Mama can be likened to Cudjo in this respect: both of them rely heavily on their religious beliefs to help them through the toughest of times.

Beneatha on the other hand, believes solely in science, knowledge, and human innovation, which is quite unlike the beliefs of Yoruba or Christian beliefs, which rely on faith in a higher power.

When Asagai is introduced in the play as one of Beneatha's suitors it becomes apparent that not only does Beneatha show distaste for Christianity, but she also fails to appreciate her African roots and, in turn, her sense of self. Asagai gives Beneatha authentic African robes, for which she is grateful. However, she becomes offended and confused when Asagai shares his disapproval about the way she does her hair. With this in mind, Asagai concludes, "Assimilationism is so popular in your country." (Hansberry 63). Beneatha adamantly denies being an assimilationist, however, her lack of understanding about her African roots indicates that she hasn't taken much time to learn about her heritage. Beneatha's search for identity throughout the drama shows that she longs to connect with her African heritage, however, she fails to recognize the connection between one's culture and one's religion. Her lack of religious beliefs leaves her in limbo between both African American and white cultures.

By the end of the drama Asagai has asked Beneatha to marry him and move back to Africa with him. Beneatha doesn't give him an answer before the drama comes to an end. With the Younger family's big move to the white neighborhood, Clybourne Park, they are symbolically placing themselves deeper within white society. The unanswered question of the drama is whether or not Beneatha will remain there with the family or if she will eventually make the move to Africa with Asagai to embrace her African roots. With Walter's disapproving reaction, it can be inferred that Beneatha will stay with her family in America and continue to search for her place within white culture in hopes of developing her own identity separate from her African roots as well as from the expectations of white society.

Although Malcolm X would be in agreement with Beneatha's disdain for Christianity, he would disagree with her and her family's attempt to integrate into the white man's culture. Sometime during his prison sentence, Malcolm is introduced to the religion of Islam. Malcolm's acceptance of and devotion to the Nation of Islam can be viewed as the turning point of his life. Malcolm takes note as to how the white man has used Christianity as a weapon against non-white cultures:

I perceived, as I read, how the collective white man had been actually nothing but a practical opportunist who used Faustian machinations to make his own Christianity his initial wedge in criminal conquests. First, always "religiously," he branded "heathen" and "pagan" labels upon ancient non-white cultures and civilizations. The stage thus set, he then turned upon his non-white victims his weapons of war. (Haley 204).

Malcolm's original view of religion can be likened to Beneatha's: they both reject the idea of Christianity and disrespect those who embody it. To contrast Beneatha, Malcolm takes his rejection of Christianity to the next level by categorizing it as one of the many aspects of white culture that he resolves to condemn.

For Cudjo, religion, whether it be Yoruba or Christianity, is a comforting belief system that keeps him close to his homeland and deceased family. To contrast, nearly one hundred years later, Malcolm X concludes that Christianity has no respect for African Americans and that Islam is the only religion he is able to accept as a discriminated black man, trapped in a white man's country. Malcolm uses his newfound religious beliefs to fuel his hatred of the white man and to push for a separation between the white and black populations:

We reject *segregation* even more militantly than you say you do! We want *separation*, which is not the same! The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that *segregation* is

when your life and liberty are controlled, regulated, *by someone else*. To *segregate* means to control. Segregation is that which is forced upon inferiors by superiors. But *separation* is that which is done voluntarily, by two equals – for the good of both! (Haley 283).

Here Malcolm is using his religious beliefs to justify and help support the reasons why the African American population should be promoting separation rather than integration. This ideology is different from the Younger family's; choose to move out of their apartment in the ghetto and into a white neighborhood.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm details his personal narrative of developing from a criminal, to a faithful minister in the Nation of Islam, and eventually to his excommunication from his religion. There is no denying that religion had a huge impact on Malcolm's life; it was the catalyst that pushed him to become something greater than what he was originally expecting himself to become.

Religion plays a significant role in *Barracoon*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as it acts as a way for African Americans to stay connected to their African roots. Additionally, religion has always, and will always, go hand-in-hand with one's cultural experiences. Cudjo sees the similarities between Yoruba and Christianity and welcomes both religions into his world. Beneatha struggles to accept any notion of religion and, hence, distances herself from her heritage. Malcolm X relates Christianity to white power; therefore, he seeks to practice and promote the ideologies of the Nation of Islam. These three works prove to readers that there is no linear path to finding one's ideal religion; one's religious belief and experience with religion is always subjective.

Works Cited

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