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Between Dreams and Realities: Deconstructing Beneatha's Pan-Africanist Ideals and the Paradox of Choice in *A Raisin in the Sun*

DR. **İBRAHİM KOÇ***

Abstract

This article is a critical exploration of Beneatha Younger's ideological shift in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. While many critical readings of the play contend that Beneatha's rejection of George Murchison's romantic prospect and embrace of Joseph Asagai's Pan-Africanism start a path for self-liberation, this study addresses the issue from a more contemporary and different perspective. Beneatha's turning away from assimilation and getting closer to traditional African values aligns with the radical political movements of the 1950s; however, her chosen ideology appears to mismatch both her long-term objectives and the material realities of the society: economic and gender-related dimensions of Beneatha's choice reflect a qualitative conflict between idealism and pragmatism in materialistic American society. Asagai's pan-Africanist tendency is intellectually intriguing, but it is far from being a credible option for Beneatha, because it depends on the assumption that a young African American woman will easily integrate into a post-colonial African society. In contrast, George Murchison's assimilationist stance, grounded in financial pragmatism and social mobility, presents an alternative more in harmony with the socio-economic conditions of the era. By situating Beneatha's choices within this broader framework, the article challenges overly simplistic interpretations of her character and emphasizes the need to reconcile ideological commitments with pragmatic realities.

Key Words: Pan-Africanism, Assimilation, Racial Identity, Black Feminism, Lorraine Hansberry.

Hayaller ve Gerçekler Arasında: *A Raisin in The Sun*'da Beneatha'nın Pan-Afrikanist İdealleri ve Seçim Paradoksunun Yapısökümü

Öz

Bu makale, Lorraine Hansberry'nin *A Raisin in the Sun* oyunundaki Beneatha Younger karakterinin yaşadığı ideolojik değişime yönelik eleştirel bir incelemedir. Oyunun birçok eleştirel okuması, Beneatha'nın George Murchison'ın romantik beklentisini reddedip Joseph Asagai'nin Pan-Afrikanizmini benimsemesinin bireysel özgürlüğe doğru bir yol açtığını ileri sürerken, bu çalışma konuyu biraz daha çağdaş ve farklı bir perspektiften ele almaktadır. Beneatha'nın asimilasyondan uzaklaşıp geleneksel Afrika değerlerine yaklaşması 1950'lerin radikal siyasi hareketleriyle

* Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Science and Letters, Ordu University. E-mail: ibrahimkoc@odu.edu.tr; ORCID: 0000-0001-9510-3376

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örtüşmektedir; ancak seçtiği ideoloji hem uzun vadeli hedefleriyle hem de toplumun maddi gerçekleriyle uyuşmuyor gibi görünmektedir: Beneatha'nın seçiminin ekonomik ve toplumsal cinsiyetle ilgili boyutları, materyalist Amerikan toplumunda idealizm ile pragmatizm arasındaki niteliksel çatışmayı yansıtmaktadır. Asagai'nin pan-Afrikanist eğilimi entelektüel açıdan ilgi çekici olsa da Beneatha için anlamlı bir seçenek olmaktan uzaktır, çünkü genç bir Afrikalı Amerikalı kadının sömürge sonrası Afrika toplumuna kolayca entegre olabileceği varsayımına dayanmaktadır. Buna karşılık, George Murchison'ın finansal pragmatizm ve sosyal hareketlilik temelli asimilasyonist duruşu, dönemin sosyo-ekonomik koşullarıyla daha uyumlu bir alternatif sunuyor. Beneatha'nın seçimlerini bu geniş çerçeve içine yerleştiren bu makale, onun karakterine ilişkin aşırı basit yorumlara meydan okumakta ve ideolojik bağlılıkları pragmatik gerçeklerle uzlaştırma ihtiyacını vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pan-Afrikanizm, Asimilasyon, Irksal Kimlik, Siyah Feminizm, Lorraine Hansberry.

INTRODUCTION

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun (1959)* is one of the foundational works of American theater. The play presents a powerful portrayal of the struggles faced by a working-class African American family in post-World War II Chicago. The drama explores issues of class, race, gender, and identity and distinctly criticizes the institutional and financial barriers that prevent African Americans from achieving the so-called American Dream. (Alaqeel, 2022, p. 179). Hansberry explores the contradictions between upward social mobility and cultural legacy through the Younger family's experiences by showing the internal and external difficulties influencing their aspirations.

The play's intriguing story and its ongoing relevance to contemporary social concerns help explain its enduring critical significance. As Lorraine Hansberry's debut work, *A Raisin in the Sun* was recognized with the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award in 1959. It triumphed over some well-known works of this genre, including Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Archibald Macleish's *JB*, and Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet* (Li & Liu, 2016, p. 1141). The significance of the play in literary and cultural studies has been emphasized by critics and scholars who have studied it in depth, focusing on how it depicts the impacts of the American Dream and its main characteristics.

Lorraine Hansberry's close contact with influential African American intellectuals of the mid-20th century, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, allowed her to contribute significantly to the pertinent debates of her time. As with many other issues, *A Raisin in the Sun* addresses and portrays the multi-layered nature of identity. The narrative of Beneatha Younger, a young woman trying to reconcile her cultural identity with her professional ambitions, is of particular significance in this context. Beneatha, whose personality is still in formation due to her age, is shaped by both individual and societal pressures, including those related to gender and ethnicity. Her pursuit of a career in medicine is indicative of both her personal aspirations and the more generalized generational aspiration for economic advancement and social transformation. As Samuel A. Hay observes, "The

Du Bois Era was significant, then, because it compelled African American dramatists to address the political and socioeconomic issues of race" (1994, p. 84). Beneatha's struggle is emblematic of this dramatic tradition, as she encounters persistent challenges throughout her educational journey. These challenges are rooted in her socioeconomically disadvantaged background and are exacerbated by the racial and gender-based barriers of the society she inhabits. Problems about Beneatha's personal life coexist with those about the environment in which she lived, which mirrored the circumstances of her day. Often seen through a binary perspective (Brady, 2018, p. 33), her romantic conundrum between wealthy African American George Murchison, who embodies economic pragmatism, and Nigerian Pan-Africanist Joseph Asagai, the embodiment of cultural pride, has been the source of many misinterpretations. However, conventional binary analyses often overlook the inherent complexity of both young men, necessitating a reinterpretation of Beneatha's decision in light of modern socio-political and economic realities.

Beneatha's rejection of George for his assimilationist behaviors in favor of Asagai's Pan-Africanist idealism seems to be an attractive choice, though this article contends that her choice is more complicated and calls for deeper consideration. Beneatha's preference for a romantic relationship presents the struggle between intellectual integrity and pragmatic survival. However, neither of her decisions will ensure a straight path to her freedom in the racially divided American society. This article does not trivialize the cultural importance of Beneatha's attraction to Asagai's Pan-Africanist ideals nor question the decision she makes about George. Given their promises, their expectations from life, and their current circumstances, neither man can offer Beneatha a logical path for her long-term objectives. In the play, George represents the demands of assimilation and the expectation of financial survival at the price of cultural identity. Asagai, though intellectually appealing, presents an overly idealized view of Africa that cannot see Beneatha's real experience as an African American woman. The unresolved quality of her choice highlights the greater challenge of Black women reconciling racial identity, personal ambition, and institutional limits in mid-20th-century America. Placing Beneatha's decision in a larger sociopolitical setting, this article challenges rigid interpretations of her character and stresses the need to balance between ideological integrity and pragmatic realities.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

Critical readings of *A Raisin in the Sun* can broadly be divided into two main categories. The first emphasizes the sociopolitical and historical contexts that influenced the Youngers' struggles for survival, including postcolonial, African American, and New Historicist readings. The other group of studies focuses on gendered dynamics within the household, often explored by various forms of feminist critique. Feminist academics examine how the dreams and psychological conflicts of Beneatha, Ruth, and Lena Younger mirror the changing roles of African American women in the late 1950s. While some researchers have labeled Beneatha as a progressive, autonomous woman rejecting conventional gender roles, others have positioned Lena as the moral center of the play, representing a more universal historical portrait of Black women.

For example, José R. S. Vargas (2012) highlights the generational divide among the Younger women, positioning Ruth as representative of the traditional housewife role while Beneatha embodies the emerging, educated, working woman (p. 35). Meanwhile, Mama Lena symbolizes an older generation of African American women with direct ties to the legacy of slavery and sharecropping, reinforcing the play's engagement with intergenerational struggles. The detailed feminist approach of Vargas (2012), which is also informed by Derridean analysis, challenges the notion that the women in the Younger family are merely powerless figures under patriarchy. Instead, this article argues that Ruth, Beneatha, and Lena possess a dynamic and shifting balance of power and powerlessness, complicating conventional definitions of agency and oppression (p. 35). This perspective suggests that power within the Younger household is not fixed but relational, shaped by economic, cultural, and gendered constraints. Additionally, while feminist critiques have largely focused on the domestic sphere, some scholars have noted a relative lack of critical attention to how Beneatha's intellectual and ideological pursuits connect to the broader political and social movements of the time, highlighting an area for further exploration in the play's scholarship.

Several key academic voices provide valuable insights into the play's thematic complexity. Steven R. Carter (1980) contextualizes *A Raisin in the Sun* within Hansberry's broader artistic and political goals, emphasizing her engagement with Marxist literary theory, which frames the play as a critique of systemic oppression rather than merely an economic or racial narrative. He argues that "Marxist esthetics could easily stand as Hansberry's artistic credo" (p. 41). By aligning Hansberry's dramatic vision with Marxist thought, Carter highlights how her work challenges structural inequalities through both content and form, situating *A Raisin in the Sun* within a tradition of politically conscious theatre. In a later work on Hansberry's play, Carter analyzes the feminist outlook on male characters in the play. In his work titled "Images of Men in Lorraine Hansberry's Writing" (1985), he argues that rather than presenting men as outright villains, Hansberry created complex male figures who struggle with both personal and societal pressures while also contributing to the oppression of women (p. 160). However, he further underlines that the male characters in the play (Walter, George, and Asagai) are dealt with in a structure that breaks traditional gender roles, without ignoring the fact that, as well as their negative aspects, they are open to development (p. 161). Underneath Asagai's chauvinism, Walter's impulsiveness, and George's arrogance are narrative indicators that reveal the larger socio-political dynamics influencing their actions, including colonial legacies, economic pressures, and patriarchal expectations. Not only do we depict these characters as imperfect individuals, but also as products of converging historical and ideological systems.

Jee Hyun An (2004) explores the aspirations of Black women in mid-century Chicago, highlighting how *A Raisin in the Sun* articulates their struggles within intersecting racial and gendered structures (p. 132). Cheryl Higashida (2008) examines Hansberry's engagement with existentialist and anti-imperialist thought, suggesting that Beneatha's ideological evolution reflects a broader critique of colonialism and assimilation (p. 901). She argues that under the influence of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, Hansberry developed a more nuanced vision of Black feminist thought (p. 900). Higashida also notes that Hansberry critiqued European and American

existentialist writers such as Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet, viewing their work as constrained by a nihilistic and solipsistic worldview that neglected historical materialist analyses of social change. According to this reading, Hansberry saw Western existentialist philosophy as ultimately complicit in reinforcing racist and heteropatriarchal ideologies (p. 905). Taken together, these insights highlight Hansberry's distinctive approach to feminism, one that merges existential concerns with a materialist critique of systemic oppression.

Kristin L. Matthews (2008) explores the concept of "home" in *A Raisin in the Sun*, interpreting the Youngers' move as a reflection of African American resistance and socio-economic mobility in the postwar era. In her article "The Politics of 'Home' in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*," she argues that the play critically examines the racially charged politics of homeownership in post-World War II Southside Chicago, situating the Younger family's struggle within a broader historical and socio-political context. Matthews emphasizes how Hansberry portrays "home" not merely as a physical space but as a contested ideological terrain, reflecting the intersection of race, class, and civil rights struggles. As Matthews writes, the play "stresses the necessity of finding a solid home where one might house and express oneself; at the same time, Raisin insists that individuals must be willing to join with other voices and the larger community in order to change oppressive social systems—even if that means singing harmony instead of a solo" (Matthews, 2008, p. 558). This perspective emphasizes the play's resistance to singular or binary interpretations of Black identity, instead advocating for a pluralistic, communal approach to social change.

New historicist readings also stress the racial and economic factors that shape the character dynamics of the play. Applying a Marxist viewpoint, Ohood Alaqeel (2022) contends that *A Raisin in the Sun* questions the capitalist system that haunts African Americans. Although Beneatha's rejection of George is sometimes seen as a triumph of ideological purity over materialism, Alaqeel argues that it also exposes Black women's financial vulnerability in a society where financial independence is still elusive (p. 180). Yun-Xia Li and Hai-Yan Liu (2016) also question accepted interpretations of Asagai as a merely liberatory figure, contending that although intellectually appealing, his Pan-Africanist ideas ignore the structural difficulties Beneatha would have as an African American woman in postcolonial Africa (p. 1142). This viewpoint fits complaints of idealized nationalism and visions of Africa framed as culturally pure and redemptive spaces by making connections between Beneatha's situation and historical discussions between Garveyism and Du Boisian integrationism. Garveyism promoted Black self-determination and a return to Africa, often rooted in cultural essentialism, whereas Du Boisian integrationism advocated for racial equality through civil rights and socio-political inclusion within American society.

These critical points of view challenge simplified interpretations of *A Raisin in the Sun* that characterize Beneatha's decision as a straightforward rejection of assimilation in favor of cultural authenticity. Rather, the drama shows a more complex struggle of identity molded by historical, financial, and gender limitations. Although many critical readings stress inflexible racial binaries, such as assimilationist against nationalist, materialistic versus idealistic, or progressive versus traditional, this study argues that such frameworks ignore the multiple and changing identities inside the play. Often highlighted as a representative of the 'new generation' beginning to blossom

in the 1950s and a mirror of Hansberry's progressive activism, Beneatha is typically set against Ruth, who represents a household ideal, and Walter Lee, who presents a failing patriarch. However, these binary readings ignore Hansberry's fluid, diverse character and political and psychological depth, reducing her characters to set ideological viewpoints. Considering the contribution of scholarly works on the play, this article aims to rethink Beneatha's decision, moving beyond binary models to consider the broader implications of her ideological and romantic choices within the framework of systematic oppression and individual choice.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND AND THEMATIC CONCERNS

The Younger family consists of Lena Younger (Mama), the matriarch who upholds faith and tradition; her son Walter Lee, a frustrated chauffeur yearning for financial independence; her daughter Beneatha, an ambitious medical student grappling with questions of identity; Walter's wife, Ruth, a pragmatic woman burdened by domestic struggles; and their young son, Travis. The family's dynamics shift dramatically when they receive a $10,000 life insurance check following the death of Lena's husband. However, rather than providing a straightforward path to prosperity, the insurance money becomes a source of tension, as each member envisions a different means of achieving a better life (Prakasa & Soelistyarini, 2016, p. 98). This conflict over the use of the money serves as a catalyst for exploring deeper issues of generational aspiration, gender roles, and socio-economic identity within the family.

The Younger family's living conditions, a cramped, two-bedroom apartment with a shared bathroom, reflect the systemic racial and economic constraints imposed on African Americans in the mid-20th century. Their deteriorating home is emblematic of the failures of urban housing policies, which compelled low-income Black families to overcrowded and underfunded neighborhoods. Such a stark pattern contrasts with the postwar suburban expansion, where detached houses with gardens became the hallmark of white middle-class prosperity. The detail regarding urban planning policies in the play points to a broader process of urban transformation in Western metropolitan areas that began in the 1960s and accelerated toward the end of the decade. According to Mendes (2011), this process is "partly due to the fact that, since the late 1960s, housing in the cities of advanced capitalism has undergone significant changes with the emergence of new housing products and new forms of housing" (p. 83). Such changes have shaped urban spatial organization by encouraging micro-scale segregation as a response to growing social fragmentation and complexity.

Mama's intention to buy a home in an overwhelmingly white neighborhood is symbolic of two things: first, her rebellion against the systemic racism of the time, redlining and residential segregation, and second, her desire to better her family's living conditions, what is known as the "gentrification tendency" (Mendes, 2011, p. 84). So, the hostility they encounter, embodied by Karl Lindner, who offers the family money to stop moving, serves as a reminder of the systemic racism that hinders social mobility (Barker, 2014, pp. 34-35). It also stands as a barrier to the necessary modernization of metropolitan areas.

Walter Lee's aspirations drive much of the play's central conflict. Desperate to escape financial hardship, he sees investment in a liquor store as his only means of reclaiming his masculinity and

authority in a world that continuously denies him power. His frustration is intense when he laments, "Nobody in this house is ever going to understand me" (Hansberry, 1994, p. 14). Walter feels powerless both because of the patriarchal pressures of traditional gender roles and because of a racist economic system that denies Black men financial independence. His internal struggles manifest in his tense relationship with Ruth, who, as a realist, sees life as "a barrel of disappointments" (p. 20). Their communication problem, symbolized in the breakfast scene where Ruth scrambles his eggs despite his request otherwise (p. 10), underscores the tension between Walter's dreams and Ruth's practical approach to survival.

Walter's internalized frustrations extend beyond his family. His accusation that Black women have "small minds" (p. 11) reflects his insecurities, projecting the systemic limitations he faces onto those closest to him. Nevertheless, this frustration, which he projects outward as anger or indifference, will cause some changes in him over time, and this evolutionary change is essential for the resolution phase of the game. After losing the family's remaining insurance money to a fraudulent business associate, Walter is left with a choice: accept Lindner's offer and regain financial stability or reject it and assert his family's dignity. At a critical moment, Walter chooses self-respect, signaling his transformation from a desperate dreamer to a leader who prioritizes his family's collective future over personal ambition.

Beneatha's desire to become a doctor places her at odds with the societal expectations of Black women in the 1950s. Her ambition represents both a rejection of traditional gender roles and a defiance of racial barriers, yet her personal journey is complicated by the ideological influences of her two suitors. The first one is George Murchison, a wealthy and well-educated African American man who represents the path of assimilation, according to the majority of critical reviews of the play. The strongest evidence in favor of this characterization of George is that in one encounter, Beneatha referred to her boyfriend, who had come to her house to take her on a date, in this way. When he dismisses Beneatha's cultural exploration, calling her embrace of African heritage "eccentric" (p. 43), enraged Beneatha reacts by saying, "I hate assimilationist Negroes!" (p. 43). However, George, who does not take this reaction, which could normally be seen as an insult, very seriously, says that Beneatha's attitude is typical of "college girls" (p. 43), that is, childish. Considering the ideological context of the 1950s, George's perspective can be criticized, as it apparently reflects the belief that success for Black Americans requires adherence to white middle-class norms rather than cultural reclamation. The second influence on Beneatha is Joseph Asagai, a Nigerian student who offers an entirely different worldview. He encourages Beneatha to reject assimilation and embrace a Pan-African identity and proposes to marry her and return to Nigeria together. Asagai's romanticized vision of Africa ignores the complexity of postcolonial struggles. Besides, his out-of-the-blue proposal is naïve enough to assume that Beneatha, a member of a working-class family born and raised in America, will make a seamless return to her 'homeland,' which she has never fully known.

Beneatha's ideological struggle serves as an example of the larger diasporic conflicts that African Americans face, particularly the difficulty of balancing heritage with actual circumstances. Walter remains indifferent to the significant distinctions that exist between Asagai and George. He is convinced that the only way to satisfy his yearning for wealth is to distance himself from Assegai's

culture, which he identifies as the source of his impoverishment, and ascend to George's status, where he envisions his salvation (Alaqeel, 2022, p. 179). Beneatha's rejection of George is often viewed as a complete rejection of assimilation, reflecting the notion expressed by Yomna Saber (2010) that it represents "a fusion that entailed a profound and irremediable loss of one's ethnic identity" (p. 452). The process of assimilation involves the dissolution of the identity of marginalized groups into the prevailing culture of the dominant larger group, specifically that of white America (p. 452). Nevertheless, this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the historical constraints she faces as a Black woman in 1950s America. George's financial resources and educational background may provide Beneatha with the economic stability essential for the pursuit of her career aspirations, while Asagai's ideals, though appealing, overlook the tangible challenges she would face as a foreign-born woman in post-colonial Nigeria. Beneatha's decision reflects a complex interaction of individual aspirations, racial identity, and the societal constraints of her time, rather than a simple dichotomy between cultural fidelity and assimilation.

The title of the play is undoubtedly the best indicator of unfinished, unrealized dreams and the destructive effects of these dreams on marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society. Langston Hughes's poem 'Harlem,' which poses the question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" serves as the inspiration for the title, referring to the frustrations of African Americans who are denied equal opportunities. Hughes's imagery of deferred dreams, whether they "explode" or "dry up like a raisin in the sun," resonates with the struggles of the Younger family, whose challenges represent the generational postponement of Black aspirations. Hughes, along with others in his camp (Harlem Renaissance), supported the demand for Black writers by saying, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." (Hughes, 2010, p. 190). This call for authenticity is reflected in Hansberry's portrayal of the Younger family, who grapple with their identities and aspirations in a racially oppressive society. However, the play also underscores the difficulty of realizing that the pursuit of the American Dream should not come at the expense of familial honor. The figurative title suggests Hansberry's intention to deconstruct the Black experience by illustrating that genuine success hinges on revolutionary action in the face of systemic barriers (Wiener, 2011, p. 56). Through its exploration of racial and economic struggles, *A Raisin in the Sun* reveals the complex obstacles African Americans encounter in their pursuit of the idealized American. Walter's failed business venture, Beneatha's uncertain future, and the family's fight for homeownership all reflect the tension between aspiration and systemic limitation. However, rather than ending in despair, the play chooses resistance and resilience, embodying Hughes's final unanswered question: "Or does it explode?" In rejecting Lindner's offer, Walter asserts the family's dignity, signaling that even in the face of oppression, the dream is not entirely lost.

A Raisin in the Sun is a literary monument that still preserves its splendor today. Since the day it was introduced, it has continued to fascinate readers and audiences with its rich character dynamics and multi-layered thematic structure. The interpersonal and sociopolitical problems of the Younger family reflect the larger battle of African Americans for dignity, autonomy, and self-

definition. Hansberry offers a complex analysis of the issue by showing identity as a complicated negotiation constructed by historical, social, and economic realities and by rejecting simple narratives of assimilation against cultural pride. The play stays relevant as a timeless analysis of race, gender, and the quest for the American Dream by anchoring personal ambition inside institutional obstacles.

DECONSTRUCTING BENEATHA'S CHOICE: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL SHIFTS FROM THE 1950S TO TODAY

Beneatha Younger is a young Black woman who dreams about becoming a medical doctor, though her decision challenges social and domestic expectations. Beneatha's commitment was radical and progressive, in accordance with the spirit of her time, and represented intellectual freedom and Pan-Africanism. However, a closer examination reveals that her ideological journey contains some contradictions and limitations that call into question the assumption that her rejection of George Murchison in favor of Joseph Asagai was the ideal decision, as often interpreted in critical readings of the play. While Pan-Africanism was a significant movement among African Americans, Beneatha's choice is rooted in a personal identity marker that does not align with her goals or experiences. Her decision to favor Asagai, who embodies an abstract vision of Africa, over George, who represents social pragmatism and financial stability, raises significant questions about the logic behind her choices.

From a contemporary perspective, Beneatha's romantic dilemma echoes broader discussions within African American communities regarding cultural affirmation in romantic relationships, financial security, and identity. Recent studies on the romantic choices of African Americans indicate that while the quest for cultural and ideological compatibility often complicates decisions, economic stability remains a crucial factor in partner selection (Mouzon et al., 2020). On the contrary, in the play, Beneatha rejects George, viewing his material wealth as an indicator of assimilationist tendencies. Research has shown that many African American women still grapple with similar challenges, balancing financial stability with the pursuit of genuine cultural and racial identity (Mouzon et al., 2020). Besides, modern interpretations of *A Raisin in the Sun* tend to shift Beneatha's character from an idealistic revolutionary to a figure more aligned with middle-class respectability politics, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between philosophy and socioeconomic reality (Brady, 2018, p. 34). This transformation reflects a broader dialogue on how African American women navigate romantic agency, particularly in a society where structural barriers limit their financial independence. Media depictions of Black love relationships also frequently enforce binary stereotypes, whereby Black women must either embrace assimilationist success or reject it for radical self-assertion, therefore mirroring Beneatha's situation (Nelson, 2016, p. 16). Given these revelations, it is clear that Hansberry's depiction of Beneatha's decision is still rather relevant in modern debates on Black identity, gender expectations, and romantic life. Her struggle should be seen as part of a long-standing conflict between economic realism and cultural integrity, a dilemma that still shapes the romantic and social reality of African American women today, not as a straightforward ideological posture.

Beneatha is the character in the play who best reflects its author. Her character is deeply influenced by Hansberry's political and intellectual ambitions. As an activist engaged in anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles, Hansberry was closely connected to figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham, who advocated for racial justice in the United States and globally. Beneatha, in many ways, mirrors Hansberry's commitment to these causes (Higashida, 2008, p. 899). Therefore, her aspiration to become a doctor is not only a personal ambition but also a political statement, challenging the racial and gender norms of the 1950s. Higashida (2008) speculates that had Beneatha remained in the United States in the 1960s, she would have actively participated in the civil rights movement alongside figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (p. 900). This connection highlights Hansberry's portrayal of Beneatha as an emblem of generational change and political consciousness.

However, while Beneatha's political convictions are admirable, her ideological trajectory lacks practical foresight. Asagai encourages Beneatha to embrace her African heritage, offering her a Nigerian robe and critiquing her adherence to white beauty standards. His influence leads to a defining moment when he refers to her straightened hair as "mutilation," encouraging Beneatha to cut it off in a symbolic act of self-liberation (Hansberry, 1994, p. 34). Alaqeel (2022) interprets her decision to wear natural Afro hair as a rejection of dominant white beauty standards and an assertion of her cultural identity (p. 183). This act solidifies Beneatha's ideological transformation, reinforcing her commitment to anti-assimilationist ideals and self-determination. However, it is apparent that Beneatha embraces Pan-Africanism through her relationship with Asagai, but her engagement with African identity is largely superficial. She romanticizes Africa without fully understanding its social, economic, and political complexities. Unlike Hansberry, who engaged with African liberation movements through intellectual and political activism, Beneatha's connection to Africa is mediated through Asagai's influence. The portrayal of Beneatha's ideological transformation raises questions regarding the authenticity and durability of her engagement with African identity.

In addition to Pan-Africanism, according to Bayu Prakasa and Titien Diah Soelistyarini (2016), *A Raisin in the Sun* presents the Back to Africa Movement through the character of Joseph Asagai, who, in many ways, parallels Marcus Garvey, the leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and a staunch advocate for Black nationalism (p. 97). Garvey's movement sought to encourage African Americans to abandon the United States and resettle in Africa, where they could build a self-sufficient Black nation. However, he received mixed reactions within African American society. For example, Dr. King, one of the important opinion leaders of the community, described him as "the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny" (Lawrence, 2023). Similarly, another radical leader of the community, Malcolm X, stated, "Every time you see another nation on the African continent become independent, you see that Marcus Garvey is alive" (Lawrence, 2023). However, this vision was met with skepticism by many Black intellectuals, including W.E.B. Du Bois, who viewed integration and civil rights as more effective strategies for racial advancement and fundamentally disagreed with Marcus Garvey's separatist vision. Asagai's character, in many ways, reflects Garvey's ideology by positioning Africa as a utopian alternative to American racial oppression. Du Bois, in an article published in *The Crisis*

in 1924, condemned Garvey as "the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world" (Thompson, 1974, p. 147). This statement highlights the deep ideological rift between Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement and Du Bois's commitment to achieving equality within American society. Du Bois believed that Garvey's rhetoric encouraged escapism and ignored the necessity of confronting racial injustice on American soil. His strong opposition stemmed not only from political differences but also from concerns about Garvey's authoritarian leadership style and the impracticality of mass repatriation. Controversies regarding the independence of Liberia and the involvement of African Americans in the process continued to be debated throughout Hansberry's lifetime and reflected the larger tension between nationalist and integrationist approaches to Black liberation.

Therefore, a parallelism can be found between Beneatha's romantic and ideological decisions in the play and the larger philosophical conflict behind Marcus Garvey's Pan-African nationalism and W. E. B. Du Bois's vision of racial progress via integration. Garvey's advocacy for Black self-determination and a return to Africa corresponds with Joseph Asagai's invitation for Beneatha to reestablish her African background, but as Du Bois pointed out, such a vision sometimes ignores the actual reality and structural racism that African Americans in the United States must face (White, 2015, p. 4). Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement supported cultural reclamation, but Du Bois cautioned against romanticizing Africa without recognizing its postcolonial struggles, an issue immediately relevant to Beneatha's idealization of Asagai's own country. This split grew more pronounced during the civil rights era, especially in the late 1960s, as leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. demanded social and economic integration while Black Panther Party member Eldridge Cleaver embraced radical separatism as the only way to achieve real Black emancipation (Lee, 2020, p. 73). Beneatha's attraction to Asagai's Pan-Africanist ideas reflects the attractiveness of Garvey's nationalism, yet, as Du Bois argued, Black Americans had already created a unique identity molded by centuries of struggle inside the United States. Beneatha positions herself in this historical debate, one unsolved in modern debates on Black identity, racial mobility, and transnational belonging, by rejecting George's assimilationist pragmatism in favor of Asagai's idealism.

Beneatha's embrace of the Pan-Africanist vision is nothing but problematic. Above all, Asagai assumes that she will naturally feel at home in Nigeria because she has African ancestry. However, Beneatha is culturally American; her experiences, education, and ambitions are rooted in the United States. The assumption that she can seamlessly transition into Nigerian society ignores the historical and cultural barriers that would likely alienate her. Such a depiction reflects the criticisms directed at Garvey's movement, which tended to overlook the complexities of identity faced by African Americans whose identities were shaped by generations of life in the United States.

Moreover, Asagai's portrayal of Africa is overly simplistic. While he speaks of progress and renewal, he does not fully address the political instability, economic underdevelopment, and gender inequalities emerging in postcolonial African nations. Beneatha's response to George's somewhat condescending "our Great West African Heritage!" (Hansberry, 1994, p. 43) sarcasm, "The Ashanti were performing surgical operations when the English were still tattooing themselves with blue dragons!" (p. 43-44) can be regarded as equally superficial and unsound. Although he did not

express himself successfully, neither Beneatha nor Asagai provided a logical counterargument to George's argument. Furthermore, Asagai's belief that Beneatha will find fulfillment in Africa disregards the systemic challenges she would face as a foreign-born Black woman in a rapidly changing society. This assumption reflects the limitations of Pan-Africanist rhetoric, which often romanticized Africa as a land of opportunity without fully acknowledging the realities of postcolonial struggles. Although categorized as a shallow assimilationist, George's position is more in line with political realities that Du Bois could not ignore.

The attitude of Mama Lena, the matriarch and, in many ways, the moral center of the family, towards African heritage is indicative of the ideological readings of the play. Mama Lena's apparent indifference to her African roots can be understood within the broader historical context of forced displacement, cultural loss, and the immediate struggles faced by Black Americans in the United States. As a descendant of enslaved Africans, Mama has no direct connection to Africa beyond an ancestral past that has been severed through generations of oppression (Li & Liu, 2016, p. 1141). Unlike Beneatha, who idealizes Africa as reclaiming lost heritage, Mama sees the continent as distant and intangible, a place she neither knows nor feels connected to. Her question, "Why should I know anything about Africa?" (Hansberry, 1994, p. 30) reflects the perspective of many Black Americans who, having been born and raised in the United States, identify primarily with the American nation, even as they endure systemic racism and economic hardship (Li & Liu, 2016, p. 1142). Given that Mama has never seen Africa and likely could not locate specific countries on a map, it is unsurprising that her identity is rooted in the country where she has lived, worked, and suffered under discriminatory policies. Her focus remains on survival within the American system rather than on a symbolic or distant cultural connection. At this point, Mama's attitude is meaningful in the sense that it indicates the kind of family environment in which George is brought up. George has a worldview that the family elders, who are similar to Mama Lena in character, advise and recommend.

One interpretation of Beneatha's rejection of George Murchison is that she is not only refusing to assimilate, but she is also dismissing the possibility of achieving economic security. In a segregated America marked by pervasive racial discrimination in housing, education, and employment, economic power became the main means of assertion of independence for African Americans (Lee, 2020, p. 157). Achieving financial stability was a critical component of Black upward mobility in the 1950s, and George, despite his arrogance, offers a method to that end. His view of racial progress via economic success seems reasonable since historical events sometimes compelled Black people to give economic survival first priority over political arguments. Given the high expense of medical school, Beneatha, a driven young woman with big dreams of becoming a doctor, may have been able to secure the financial support she needed from George to pursue her ambition.

Beneatha's frustration with George stems from her perception that he prioritizes wealth and status over a deeper sense of cultural and personal identity. To her, he represents a model of success built on assimilation—an idea that Saber (2010) contrasts with integration. As Saber explains, assimilation demands a kind of erasure, "a fusion that entailed a profound and irremediable loss of one's ethnic identity" (p. 452). In this view, the assimilated individual does not simply succeed

within the dominant culture but does so at the cost of their racial pride. Integration, on the other hand, was envisioned in the 1950s as a way to affirm Black identity while still breaking down racial barriers, fostering a more inclusive society rather than one rigidly divided by color (Saber, 2010, p. 452). This distinction is crucial for understanding Beneatha's rejection of George, as it underscores her desire for a form of progress that preserves cultural integrity rather than one that demands its suppression. Her stance reflects the broader ideological debates within the African American community during the civil rights era, where the pursuit of equality was often weighed against the risk of cultural assimilation.

Beneatha acknowledges George's advantages—his good looks, financial security, and social status—but she struggles to respect him because she sees little ideological depth behind his success. Yet, in rejecting him, she overlooks the practical realities of her aspirations. Pursuing a medical career as a Black woman in 1950s America would be an immense challenge, and financial support could have provided her with a more stable foundation. At the same time, George's dismissive attitude toward Beneatha's cultural explorations, mocking her embrace of Pan-Africanism and belittling her decision to wear her natural hair after Asagai's comment, reflects the difficult compromises many Black professionals had to make to navigate white-dominated spaces. Beneatha thinks these decisions are essential for her self-discovery, but George sees them as deviations from the pressures of the actual world toward achievement. Their struggle then is not only about romance; it is a collision between two methods of survival in a culture that continuously expects Black people to establish their value on terms not always their own.

Hansberry presents George as a real strain of Black professionals experienced in the 1950s, not as a symbol of assimilation only. Unlike Beneatha, who has the honor of participating in ideological discussions over identity, George has to defend his place in a society that presents few chances for African Americans. His realistic approach emphasizes the conflict between idealism and the pragmatic reality of racial and financial survival. This tension is further emphasized by the generational divide between Beneatha and her sister-in-law, Ruth. Ruth, shaped by her life experiences as a married woman with children, prioritizes George's financial stability, as seen when she responds to Beneatha's criticism by saying, "Shallow—what do you mean he's shallow? He's rich!" (Hansberry, 1994, p. 23). In contrast, Beneatha values cultural authenticity and personal fulfillment over economic success, as evidenced by her description of George: "Well. George looks good—he's got a beautiful car, and he takes me to nice places, and, as my sister-in-law says, he is probably the richest boy I will ever get to know, and I even like him sometimes—but if the Youngers are sitting around waiting to see if their little Bennie is going to tie up the family with the Murchisons, they are wasting their time" (p. 23). Here, Beneatha's rejection of George represents a privileged stance, suggesting that cultural integrity can exist independently of economic security. While her decision aligns with Hansberry's radical politics, it also underscores the complexities of navigating Black identity in a racially oppressive society. Through this dynamic, Hansberry explores the difficult choices faced by African Americans as they strive for both economic stability and self-determination.

Beneatha's interactions with George undeniably reveal Hansberry's efforts to challenge Western misconceptions about Africa. Beneatha's lecture to George about Africa's rich history states, "You are standing there in your splendid ignorance talking about people who were the first to smelt iron on the face of the earth!" (p. 43). This contrasts sharply with George's reductionist view of African heritage as "a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts" (p. 43). As Ojima et al. (2016) noted, while George's perspective reflects the established biases of American society, Beneatha's idealism highlights her commitment to reclaiming and celebrating her African roots (p. 52). In the end, Hansberry uses the contrast between Beneatha and George to examine the complexities of Black identity, the pressures of economic survival, and the enduring struggle for self-determination in a racially divided society. Through these characters, the play underscores the tension between idealism and practicality, cultural heritage and contemporary realities, and individual aspirations and systemic barriers.

Beyond economic and ideological concerns, Asagai's expectations of Beneatha also raise questions about gender roles and autonomy. While he presents himself as an enlightened intellectual, his views on women are deeply traditional. He assumes that Beneatha will accompany him to Africa without considering her aspirations. His comment that love should be "enough" (Hansberry, 1994, p. 36) for a woman reveals a patriarchal mindset that contradicts Beneatha's desire for independence. This moment highlights the tension between progressive ideals and ingrained gender expectations, suggesting that even Asagai, a seemingly radical male character of the play, is not exempt from perpetuating traditional power structures.

This perspective also parallels Garvey's views on gender. Despite advocating for Black empowerment, Garvey maintained conservative beliefs about women's roles, emphasizing their duty to support male leadership rather than assert their authority. Unlike Marcus Garvey, who was known as egotistical, cruel, cunning, intolerant, and opportunistic, Asagai is portrayed in the play as kind and good-natured (Prakasa & Soelistyarini, 2016, p. 99). Yet, Asagai, similarly, envisions Beneatha's future within the framework of his ambitions. Rather than supporting her dream of becoming a doctor in America, he proposes an escape to Africa, where she would adopt a life that he envisions.

The relational dynamic in *A Raisin in the Sun* clouds the idea that Asagai offers a progressive substitute for George. Although George is sometimes attacked for his assimilationist inclinations, his view of the future does not always force Beneatha to give up her goals. Asagai presents a different but equally constrictive vision, one that calls Beneatha to fit his standards instead of allowing her agency to choose her road forward.

The dubious finale of the drama gently highlights this conflict. Hansberry's decision to leave Beneatha's future unsettled makes the viewers wonder whether any of the choices she is given fit her best interests. One of the most provocative aspects of the drama is the ambiguity around her choice, which implies that neither George nor Asagai genuinely supports her right to autonomy.

A deconstructive study of the political and ideological roots of Beneatha, George, and Asagai's love triangle reveals the enduring relevance of Hansberry's message. Examining how the play articulates persistent socio-political tensions allows us to appreciate its continued resonance in

contemporary discourse. While Black identity, gender roles, and economic opportunities have evolved since the 1950s, many of the challenges Beneatha faced, such as limited access to financial independence, societal expectations around assimilation, and gendered power dynamics, remain present even today. In the present time, characterized by institutional barriers to wealth accumulation, increasing student debt, and racial disparities in employment, Beneatha's rejection of George's economic pragmatism warrants renewed critical attention. What may have once appeared as a principled act of ideological defiance could today be reinterpreted as a missed opportunity for economic empowerment. Within a structurally unequal society, financial security does not necessarily negate cultural integrity; instead, it can provide the means for sustained resistance and self-realization. Beneatha's dilemma, therefore, continues to resonate, not as a closed narrative, but as a reflection of ongoing tensions between personal values and systemic constraints.

Furthermore, even though Pan-African ideas had a great influence in the middle of the 20th century, the reality of a globalized world brings fresh and difficult problems. Africa becomes a continent distinguished by great political and economic differences, not only as a symbolic haven of cultural authenticity. Adapting to Nigerian society could prove challenging for an African American woman like Beneatha, particularly considering the different gender roles and cultural expectations she might run up against there. What looked to be an empowering escape might today seem like yet another kind of restriction. The prospect of moving to a postcolonial nation, with its unique set of challenges, may render Asagai's vision less attractive than it previously appeared. Hansberry's following words alone are enough to undermine any suggestion that Beneatha would have found salvation in running away to Africa: "It is, on the other hand, also a great nation with certain beautiful and indestructible traditions and potentials which can be seized by all who possess imagination and love of man. There is, as a certain play suggests, a great deal to be fought in America—but, at the same time, there is so much that begs to be but reaffirmed and cherished with sweet defiance" (Hansberry, 1970, pp. 129-130). This statement affirms Hansberry's belief in the necessity of engaging with American society rather than escaping it. While Pan-African ideals may inspire cultural pride and the struggle for justice and self-definition, in Hansberry's view, they must occur within the lived context of racial and economic inequality in the United States. Beneatha's path, then, is not about geographical relocation but about confronting and reshaping the systemic structures that limit her possibilities where she stands.

Although Beneatha's future depends clearly on economic pragmatism, it should not be seen as conflicting with cultural identity and personal fulfillment. Assuming that the only practical route to success is incorporation into the prevailing economic system runs the danger of supporting the very systematic disparities *A Raisin in the Sun* exposes. Beneatha's involvement with Pan-Africanism is more than just a political protest; it's a deliberate endeavor to recover a sense of legacy and belonging in a society that sometimes drives Black people to wipe off or stifle their cultural roots. A more complete view of Beneatha's path would consider how both aspects might coexist rather than presenting economic stability and cultural pride as competing factors. Beneatha's potential for strategic cultural negotiation, where she rejects economic stability but still refuses to surrender her identity, offers another road that the drama leaves open-ended. Modern language on race and

gender emancipation implies that financial success should not have to come at the price of cultural authenticity. Beneatha's dilemma is, therefore, still valid today since Black professionals must negotiate environments that call for economic pragmatism while under pressure from assimilationists. Her struggle is not only about deciding between George and Asagai but also about figuring out how to establish her individuality inside a racial and economic system that provides few means to reach self-actualization.

CONCLUSION

This study of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* employs the methods of New Historicist, feminist, and deconstructive literary studies to evaluate the attitudes and behaviors of the play's young female protagonist towards the two men who enter her life. More generally, as its poetic title suggests, the play explores dreams that are deferred, altered, and sometimes abandoned. Each member of the Youngers, a working-class African American family, has a dream of a better life. As these dreams encounter various individual and social obstacles, the family dynamics and psychological integrity of the family members are tested.

A contemporary reading of Beneatha Younger's romantic dilemma between her boyfriend, George Murchison, and Joseph Asagai, an African immigrant student she later meets, is the focus of this study. George's economic pragmatism and Asagai's pan-African idealism provide an opportunity to discuss broader issues of survival, self-identification, and racial identity in the mid-20th-century United States. Critical readings of the play, however, often interpret these two attitudes in opposition to each other. This study reveals the contradictions in Beneatha's decision by showing the shortcomings of both ideals/attitudes. In other words, it challenges these binary interpretations of her rejection of George, sometimes seen as a bold act of self-determination, and her attraction to Asagai as a natural embrace of African culture. It also highlights Beneatha's plight as a Black woman struggling against institutional oppression and racism and argues that no one option offers a clear or complete solution to her ambitions.

Asagai's Pan-Africanist vision, while intellectually fascinating, presents a utopian view of Africa that ignores the historical and structural realities that shaped Beneatha's identity. The idea that Beneatha, first and foremost an African American, would fit in very well in Nigerian society ignores the gender and cultural barriers she would face in Africa as an American woman. However, George, who was sometimes cold-shouldered as a superficial assimilationist, can offer Beneatha reasonable financial stability to help her achieve her long-term professional career goals. George's behavior, however, raises legitimate doubts about whether material success requires the sacrifice of self-identity and cultural authenticity. He transforms into an unfavorable character by his patronizing behavior towards the Younger family's earnest and straightforward nature, coupled with his rejection of Black cultural heritage.

Hansberry may have wanted the readers to reflect on the dichotomy between racial pride and pragmatic survival by leaving Beneatha's future uncertain at the end of the play. This detail undoubtedly increases the depth and variety of the play's scholarly readings. Rather than suggesting a definitive formula, the play emphasizes the constant struggle between cultural authenticity,

upward economic mobility, and personal will. Within this equation, Beneatha's problem is not only to choose between two men but also to adapt to her reality and face the greater challenge of self-identification within a system of institutional oppression and racism. *A Raisin in the Sun* shows how complex the path to self-realization can be, especially for people who are disadvantaged and marginalized in terms of race, gender, and class. Beneatha's uncertain future is a reminder that sometimes pursuing dreams requires striking a difficult balance between idealism and pragmatism, cultural pride and economic needs, and resistance and adaptation. Ultimately, Hansberry's play forces us to confront the constant conflicts shaping the lives of people who pursue personal fulfillment and institutional change.

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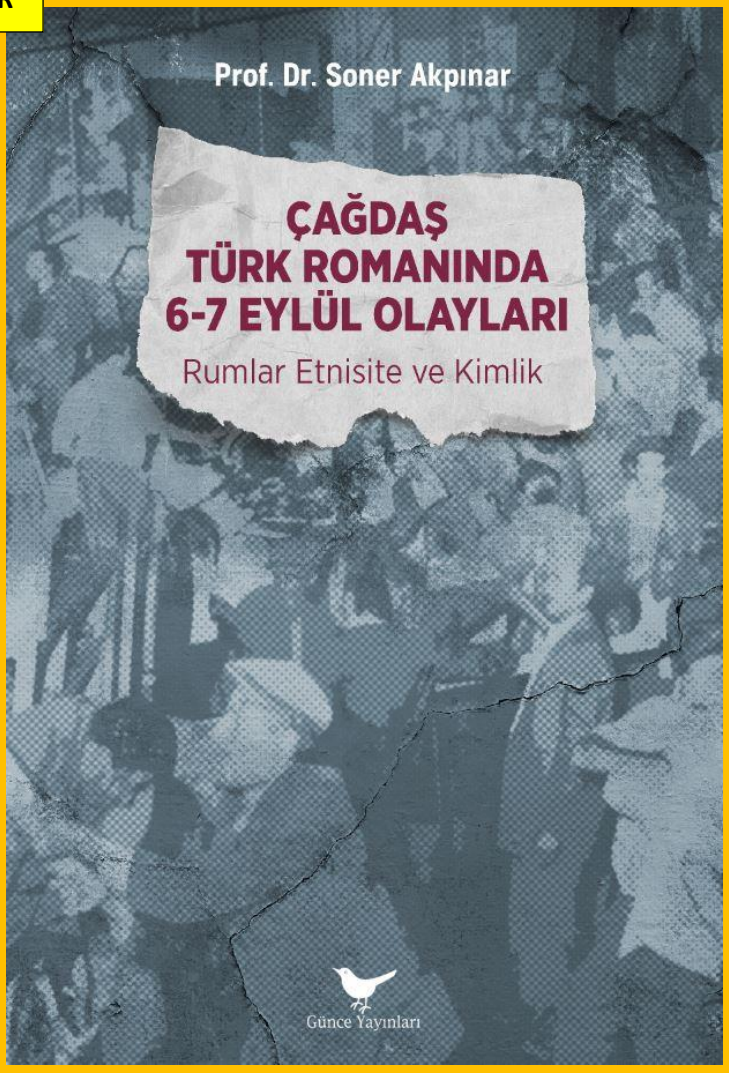
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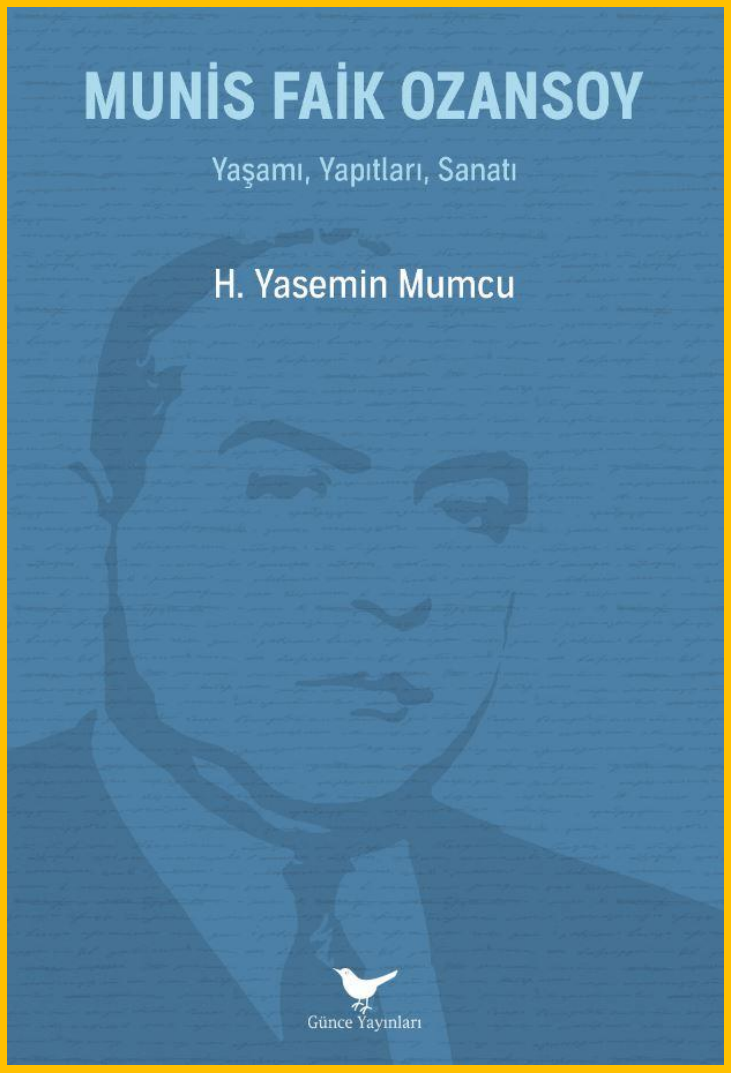
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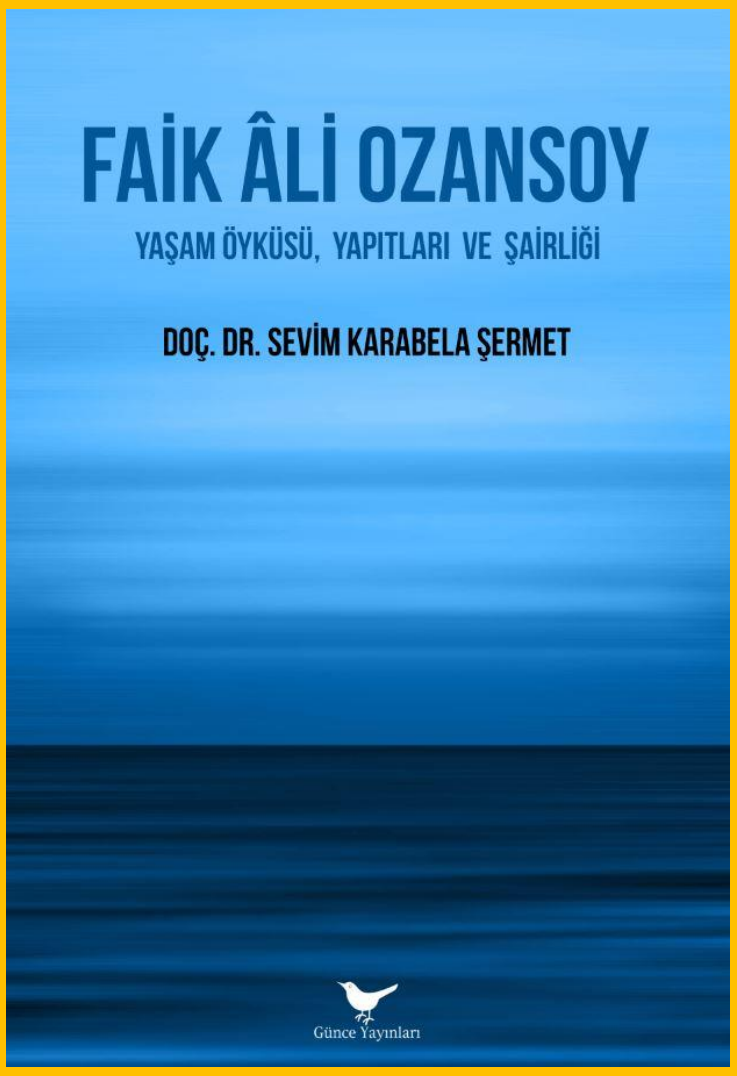
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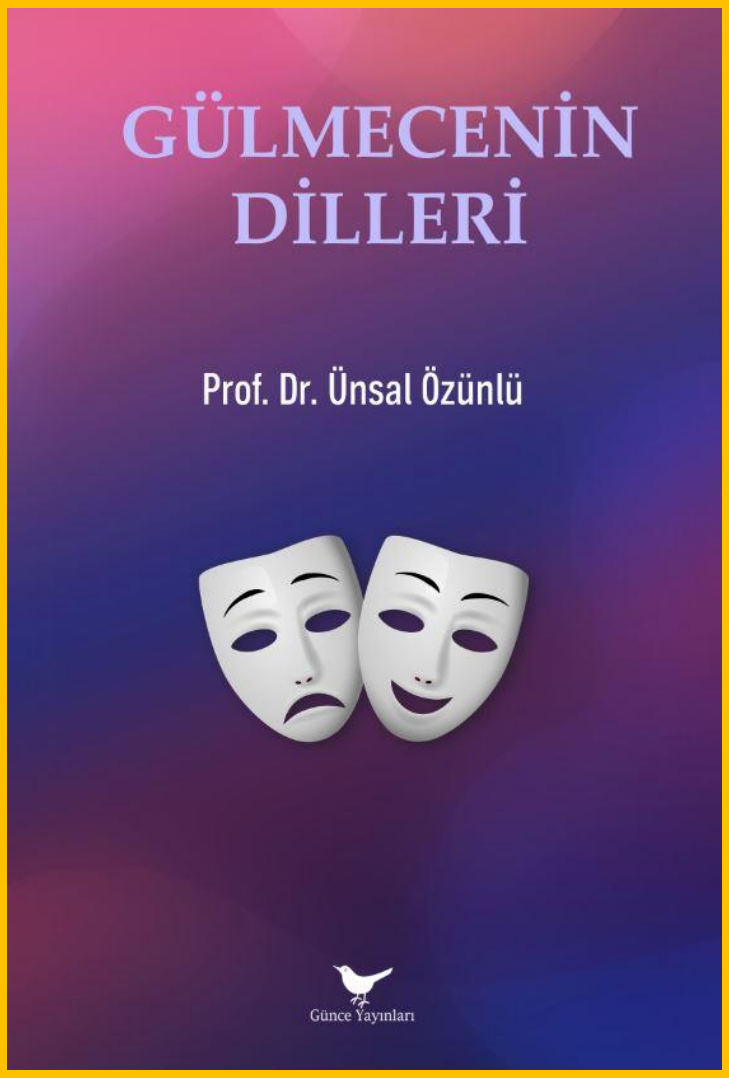
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