Negotiating Masculinity: An Analysis of Male Characters in African American Literature

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Abstract- This study explores how African American male characters negotiate their masculinity in different social contexts through a comparative analysis of three seminal works of African American literature: Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959), August Wilson's "Fences" (1985), and Wilson's "Gem of the Ocean" (2003). Employing a qualitative textual analysis approach and drawing on key concepts from masculinity studies, the paper examines how characters navigate traditional gender roles, perform masculinity, face crises of manhood, and search for identity. The findings reveal that masculinity is a fluid concept, constantly negotiated in response to changing social, economic, and cultural contexts. Societal expectations, economic factors, generational differences, and the intersection of race, class, and gender significantly influence the characters' masculine identities. The study highlights the complexity and diversity of African American masculinity, the resilience of African American men, and the need for more inclusive definitions of manhood. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how African American men navigate and redefine their masculine identities in response to societal challenges and personal aspirations. The study underscores the importance of considering historical context in understanding African American masculinity and its ongoing negotiation in literature and society.

I. INTRODUCTION

The negotiation of masculinity in different social contexts has been a subject of increasing interest in literary and cultural studies, particularly within African American literature. This topic holds significant importance as it sheds light on the complex interplay between gender identity, race, and socioeconomic factors in shaping men's experiences and self-perception. The way men navigate their masculinity in various settings reveals much about societal expectations, power dynamics, and the evolving nature of gender roles.

In the African American context, the construction and performance of masculinity are deeply influenced by historical and contemporary experiences of racial discrimination, economic marginalization, and cultural stereotypes. As Connell (2000) argues, masculinity should not be perceived as a universal entity, but rather as a configuration of gender practices negotiated in time, ideology, and culture. This negotiation becomes particularly complex for African American men who must often contend with both societal expectations of masculinity and the realities of racial oppression.

This paper posits that African American men negotiate their masculinity in different settings through a complex process of conforming to, resisting, and redefining traditional masculine ideals in response to their unique social, economic, and cultural circumstances. This negotiation is not static but fluid, varying across different contexts and life stages, and is significantly influenced by interactions with family, community, and larger societal structures.

To explore this thesis, the paper will analyze three seminal works of African American literature: Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959), August Wilson's "Fences" (1985), and Wilson's "Gem of the Ocean" (2003). These texts, spanning different periods of the 20th century, offer rich portrayals of African American male characters navigating their masculinity in various settings.

"A Raisin in the Sun" presents Walter Younger's struggle to assert his masculinity within the constraints of racial and economic oppression in 1950s Chicago. "Fences" explores Troy Maxson's complex negotiation of masculinity as he grapples with his past, his family relationships, and the changing social landscape of the 1950s and 1960s. "Gem of the Ocean," set in 1904, examines how characters like Citizen Barlow navigate

their masculine identities in the aftermath of slavery and during the Great Migration.

Through a close analysis of these texts, this paper will illuminate the multifaceted ways in which African American men perform, challenge, and redefine masculinity in response to their unique social, historical, and personal circumstances. As hooks (2004) suggests, understanding these negotiations is crucial for developing a more nuanced and inclusive conception of masculinity that acknowledges the diversity of men's experiences and challenges harmful stereotypes.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of masculinity has evolved significantly over the past few decades, with key theories and concepts shaping our understanding of how men construct and negotiate their gender identities. This review will examine these theories, explore previous research on masculinity in African American literature, and identify gaps that this study aims to address.

Key Theories and Concepts in Masculinity Studies
Connell's (2000) concept of hegemonic masculinity has been influential in understanding how certain forms of masculinity are culturally exalted over others. This theory posits that masculinity is not a fixed attribute but a configuration of practices that are socially constructed and can change over time. Connell argues that multiple masculinities exist, with some forms being more dominant or 'hegemonic' than others.

Kimmel (2000) introduced the idea of "toxic masculinity," describing it as a set of attitudes and behaviors stereotypically associated with men that can be harmful to both men and society. This concept has been pivotal in critiquing traditional notions of masculinity and their impact on men's mental health and social relationships.

Butler's (1993) theory of gender performativity suggests that gender, including masculinity, is not an innate quality but a series of repeated acts that create the illusion of a stable gender identity. This

perspective has been crucial in understanding how men 'perform' their masculinity in different contexts.

Masculinity in African American Literature
Research on masculinity in African American literature has often focused on the unique challenges faced by Black men in negotiating their gender identities within a racist society. Early (1990s) explored how African American writers have depicted Black masculinity as a site of both oppression and resistance, highlighting the complex ways in which racial and gender identities intersect.

Wallace (2002) examined the portrayal of Black masculinity in 20th-century African American literature, arguing that many writers have sought to challenge stereotypical representations of Black men by presenting more nuanced and diverse depictions of masculinity.

hooks (2004) provided a critical analysis of Black masculinity in her work, arguing for the need to challenge patriarchal notions of manhood and develop more progressive forms of Black masculinity. Her work has been influential in understanding how Black men navigate societal expectations and personal aspirations in constructing their masculine identities.

Gaps in the Literature
While there has been significant research on masculinity in African American literature, several gaps remain:
1. Limited focus on intergenerational differences: There is a need for more research examining how representations of Black masculinity have evolved across different generations of African American writers and characters.
2. Insufficient attention to intersectionality: While some studies have considered the intersection of race and gender, there is room for more nuanced analyses that also consider class, sexuality, and other aspects of identity in shaping Black masculinity.
3. Lack of comparative studies: Few studies have systematically compared depictions of masculinity across multiple works by different authors, spanning different time periods.
4. Limited exploration of positive masculinity: Much of the existing research focuses on the challenges

and negative aspects of Black masculinity, with less attention paid to positive or alternative models of masculinity presented in African American literature.

This study aims to address these gaps by providing a comparative analysis of masculinity across three seminal works of African American literature from different periods. It will examine how male characters negotiate their masculinity in various settings, considering intergenerational differences, intersectionality, and both challenges and positive aspects of Black masculinity.

By doing so, this research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how African American men navigate and redefine their masculine identities in response to changing social, cultural, and economic contexts. As Gilmore (1990) suggests, such an understanding is crucial for developing more inclusive and empowering conceptions of masculinity that can benefit both individuals and society as a whole.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine how men negotiate their masculinity in different settings as portrayed in three seminal works of African American literature. This methodological approach allows for a deep, nuanced exploration of the complex ways in which masculinity is constructed, performed, and challenged within literary texts.

Qualitative Textual Analysis Approach
The qualitative textual analysis approach involves a close reading and interpretation of the selected texts, focusing on the portrayal of male characters, their interactions, dialogues, and the narrative descriptions that illuminate their masculine identities. This method, as described by Creswell (2013), enables researchers to uncover underlying themes, patterns, and meanings within texts, making it particularly suitable for exploring the nuanced ways in which masculinity is negotiated in literature.

The analysis will pay particular attention to:
1. Character development and interactions

2. Dialogue and internal monologues
3. Narrative descriptions of characters' actions and motivations
4. Symbolic elements that relate to masculinity
5. The socio-historical context in which the stories are set

This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of how masculinity is portrayed and negotiated within the literary works, considering both explicit and implicit representations.

Justification for Selection of Primary Texts
The three primary texts selected for this study are:
1. "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry (1959)
2. "Fences" by August Wilson (1985)
3. "Gem of the Ocean" by August Wilson (2003)

These texts were chosen for several reasons:
1. Temporal Range: The selected works span different periods of the 20th century, allowing for an examination of how representations of masculinity have evolved over time.
2. Canonical Status: All three works are considered seminal texts in African American literature, ensuring their significance and influence in the field.
3. Diverse Male Characters: Each text presents a range of male characters negotiating their masculinity in different contexts, providing rich material for analysis.
4. Thematic Relevance: The selected works explicitly engage with themes of masculinity, identity, and racial experience, making them particularly suitable for this study.
5. Comparative Potential: The inclusion of two works by August Wilson alongside Hansberry's play allows for both intra-author and inter-author comparisons.

Analytical Framework Using Gender Theory
The analysis will be guided by a framework drawing on key concepts from gender theory, particularly those related to masculinity studies. This framework includes:
1. Connell's (2000) concept of hegemonic masculinity: This will be used to examine how

characters conform to or resist dominant forms of masculinity.
2. Butler's (1993) theory of gender performativity: This will inform the analysis of how characters 'perform' their masculinity in different contexts.
3. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989): This concept will guide the examination of how race, class, and other aspects of identity intersect with gender in shaping characters' masculinities.
4. hooks' (2004) critique of patriarchal masculinity: This will inform the analysis of how characters challenge or reinforce traditional notions of manhood.
5. Kimmel's (2000) concept of toxic masculinity: This will be used to identify and analyze potentially harmful aspects of masculine behavior portrayed in the texts.

This theoretical framework will be applied flexibly, allowing for emergent themes and patterns to be identified and explored. The analysis will involve iterative coding of the texts, identifying key themes and patterns related to masculinity, and interpreting these findings in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature.

By employing this methodology, the study aims to provide a rigorous and nuanced analysis of how men negotiate their masculinity in different settings as portrayed in these significant works of African American literature. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the complex ways in which masculinity is constructed, performed, and challenged within these texts, contributing to our understanding of the dynamics of gender identity in African American literature and culture.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Gender Roles and Expectations
The male characters in "A Raisin in the Sun," "Fences," and "Gem of the Ocean" navigate traditional gender roles in complex and often conflicting ways. In all three texts, societal expectations of masculinity heavily influence the characters' behaviors and self-perceptions.

In "A Raisin in the Sun," Walter Younger struggles to fulfill the traditional male role of family provider. His desire to invest in a liquor store reflects his attempt to assert his masculinity through financial success. As Walter says, "I want so many things that they are driving me kind of crazy" (Hansberry, 73). This quote illustrates the pressure Walter feels to meet societal expectations of male success and provision.

Troy Maxson in "Fences" embodies a more traditional view of masculinity, seeing himself as the unquestioned head of the household. He tells his son Cory, "I'm the boss around here. I do the only saying what counts" (Wilson, "Fences" 37). Troy's adherence to traditional gender roles creates conflict within his family, particularly with his son who seeks to forge his own path.

In "Gem of the Ocean," Citizen Barlow represents a younger generation grappling with evolving gender expectations. His journey to find his place in society reflects changing notions of masculinity in the early 20th century.

B. Performing Masculinity
The performance of masculinity in these texts is often tied to notions of strength, dominance, and the provider role. In "Fences," Troy's masculinity is deeply rooted in his physical strength and his role as a provider. He boasts, "I wrestled with Death for three days and three nights and I'm standing here to tell you about it" (Wilson, "Fences" 10). This metaphorical battle with death underscores Troy's view of masculinity as a constant struggle and test of strength. Walter in "A Raisin in the Sun" performs his masculinity through his pursuit of financial success and his attempts to assert authority within his family. His frustration at his perceived failure to provide is evident when he says, "I'm thirty-five years old; I've been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room" (Hansberry, 34).

In "Gem of the Ocean," Citizen's performance of masculinity is more uncertain, reflecting his search for identity. His journey to have his soul "washed" by Aunt Ester represents a different kind of masculine performance, one that involves vulnerability and spiritual growth.

C. Masculinity Crisis

All three texts depict characters facing crises of masculinity, often stemming from economic, racial, and social factors. In "A Raisin in the Sun," Walter's masculinity crisis is deeply tied to his economic struggles and racial discrimination. His outburst, "I'm a volcano. I'm a giant surrounded by ants!" (Hansberry, 85), reveals his frustration with societal constraints on his manhood.

Troy in "Fences" faces a masculinity crisis rooted in his past experiences of racial discrimination and his current struggles to adapt to changing social norms. His affair with Alberta can be seen as an attempt to reassert his masculinity in the face of aging and perceived loss of power.

In "Gem of the Ocean," Citizen's crisis of masculinity is linked to his search for identity and belonging in a post-slavery society. His guilt over Garret Brown's death and his quest for redemption reflect broader struggles of African American men to define their masculinity in a hostile social environment.

D. Search for Identity

The search for masculine identity is a central theme in all three texts, with characters negotiating between societal expectations and personal aspirations. In "A Raisin in the Sun," Walter's journey involves reconciling his dreams of success with his responsibilities as a father and husband. His eventual decision to stand up to Mr. Lindner represents a redefinition of his masculinity based on moral integrity rather than financial success.

Troy's search for identity in "Fences" is complicated by his past experiences and his resistance to change. His conflict with his son Cory highlights generational differences in conceptions of masculinity, with Troy clinging to traditional notions while Cory seeks new opportunities.

In "Gem of the Ocean," Citizen's search for identity is intrinsically linked to his spiritual journey. His interactions with Aunt Ester and the other characters in the play represent different models of masculinity that he must navigate.

The generational differences in conceptions of masculinity are particularly evident when comparing Troy in "Fences" with Walter in "A Raisin in the Sun" and Citizen in "Gem of the Ocean." Troy's rigid adherence to traditional masculinity contrasts with Walter's more conflicted approach and Citizen's search for a new kind of masculine identity in a changing world.

In conclusion, these texts present a nuanced portrayal of how African American men negotiate their masculinity in different settings, revealing the complex interplay between societal expectations, personal aspirations, and changing social norms. The characters' struggles and journeys highlight the ongoing process of defining and redefining masculinity in the face of racial, economic, and social challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how masculinity is negotiated in different contexts through the analysis of three seminal works of African American literature: "A Raisin in the Sun," "Fences," and "Gem of the Ocean." The findings reveal a complex and multifaceted process of masculine identity formation and performance among African American men.

Summary of Key Findings:
1. Fluid Negotiation: The study demonstrates that masculinity is not a fixed attribute but a fluid concept that is constantly negotiated in response to changing social, economic, and cultural contexts. Characters like Walter Younger, Troy Maxson, and Citizen Barlow all navigate their masculinity differently depending on their circumstances.
2. Influence of Societal Expectations: Traditional gender roles and societal expectations significantly impact how men perceive and perform their masculinity. This is evident in Walter's pursuit of financial success and Troy's insistence on being the unquestioned head of his household.
3. Economic Factors: Economic status plays a crucial role in shaping masculine identity. The characters' struggles with poverty and limited opportunities directly influence their sense of manhood and how they express it.

4. Generational Differences: The study reveals significant generational differences in conceptions of masculinity. Older characters like Troy tend to adhere to more traditional notions of masculinity, while younger characters like Cory and Citizen seek to redefine what it means to be a man.

5. Intersectionality: The intersection of race, class, and gender is crucial in understanding how African American men negotiate their masculinity. The characters' experiences of racial discrimination and economic marginalization profoundly shape their masculine identities.

Implications for Understanding African American Masculinity:

These findings have several implications for our understanding of African American masculinity:

1. Complexity and Diversity: African American masculinity is not monolithic but diverse and complex, influenced by various factors including age, economic status, and personal experiences.

2. Resilience and Adaptation: The characters' struggles to negotiate their masculinity in challenging circumstances highlight the resilience and adaptability of African American men.

3. Need for Broader Definitions: The study underscores the need for more inclusive and flexible definitions of masculinity that can accommodate the diverse experiences of African American men.

4. Historical Context: Understanding African American masculinity requires consideration of historical context, including the ongoing impacts of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism.

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