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**ETHNIC ANALYSIS IN *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*. LITERATURE FOR
SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING**

FORTALEZA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the academic process, I had defined that I would research ways to help young students, especially those of public schools, to read and reflect about their social contexts. When I was introduced to the play *A Raisin in the Sun* in the Literature course at Universidade Federal do Ceará, I found a literary work that brought up antiracist and anticolonial thoughts, which could change people's minds and behavior.

This study intends to investigate literary studies that could awaken students' interests in reading and interpreting literary texts. One of the main objectives of this article is to investigate ethnic studies, in order to create a pedagogical proposal that can be applied to increase critical thinking in Brazilian students of English as foreign language. One way we want to achieve that is by presenting reflections about power relations, symbolism about minorities that can be extracted from the play *A Raisin In the Sun* (1966), by Lorraine Hansberry. Another objective is to foster the interpretative capacity, bringing literary analysis to the classroom experience and, therefore, to encourage the reading habit of these students. A third objective is to present strategies for active reading in order to enhance reading skills of the students of English as Foreign Language and consequently to increase their motivation for reading more literary texts with a critical perspective.

The literary critical study that will ground this research is Ethnic analysis. This choice shows the effort to turn English as a foreign language (EFL) classes into a reflexive space to enable students to discuss and think about political, social and cultural aspects in the literary texts and to relate them to their own contexts and lives. Those studies can reveal to the reader the dominance presented in the discourse and representation in Literature.

The play *A Raisin in the Sun* will receive the analysis and a proposal about how to conduct the reading and interpreting process in the EFL classroom. The historical background will provide the elements to identify the ethnic and postcolonial ideas present in the text.

2- METHODOLOGY

The main steps of this research are the following: by reading and analyzing the play, this study will suggest debates and reflexive guidance that could be done in the classroom with the students. Also this research will summarize strategies for active reading, such as those pointed by Whitla (2010): formulating questions for reading, looking for important information, locating the text historically and culturally.

The study is a bibliographic research, an academic revision of Ethnic Studies (Castle, 2008) will focus on the main ideas of black intellectuals that can be used to teach critical reading. The analysis of the play will highlight their ideas and select scenes of the play when this representation can be found.

There will be included excerpts from the play *A Raisin in the Sun* that can exemplify the ideas about antiracism, segregation, black culture, also lines and scenes that reflect psychological and emotional features of the main characters.

3-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teaching English as a second/foreign language through Literature is a research field that has been explored by both teachers and academic researchers. There are studies carried out in order to test whether or not the students have better language achievements in contact with literary texts.

One of these studies was the one developed by the Ph.D. Mohammad Khatib (2012) in an Iranian University. His goal was to prove that literary texts can be used as a tool for English teaching, and that increases language attitude, which is the student's motivation for learning. In order to do so, he chose a control group among his classes and changed the curricular content of the general English course, including ten short stories from occidental and oriental Literature.

After guiding the students through the reading and interpreting experience he applied a linguistic test, and compared the results of the experimental group and the control group. The researcher found out that the students who had read the short stories during the course had better results in reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammatical aspects. Therefore, he defends that literature increases positive attitude toward the language and enhances the main skills to acquire it.

“The application of literature in general English classes intends to create a comfortable English learning environment in which students are willing to participate in class interactions, and accept language as an alternative means of communication, next to their L1, which can give them a different experience in many regards, not only as something which is to be learnt. In order to let students have a pleasurable and different experience, simple literary texts can be taken to the class, and the teacher should prove to be supportive psychologically and emotionally, this all happen when learners are to experience a piece of language in the class which is true life”(Khatib, M., 2012, p.44)

According to Marzieh Bagherkazemi and Minoo Alemi (2010), only in the 18th century, Literature was considered part of English teaching. The studies in these areas focused on joining oral skills and written production.

In the 19th century, there was a change in Literature studies: the main goal was defined to be comprehension instead of production, so the grammatical teaching in Literature was priority to teachers. According to Bagherkazemi & Alemi, (2010, p.2), the way Literature innovates language makes it impossible to teach the grammatical rules. Also, the cultural aspects of literary production are related to deviation from universal knowledge that allows people from different places to achieve the language.

Despite the criticism, Gadjusek (1988 apud Bagherkazemi & Alemi,2010, p.2) defends the use of literature in English language teaching, because it can provide communicative competence by searching for internal coherence and conscious pattern.

Van, T.T.M (2009) apud Bagherkazemi & Alemi apud Bagherkazemi & Alemi, 2010, p.3) identifies many advantages in teaching Literature in English classes, which are: the presence of meaningful contexts, a wide variety of vocabulary and the reinforcement of creativity and critical thinking, being the latter quite relevant for this study. Also, Literature is aligned to Communicative Language Teaching, because meaning is the principal input for the reader who has contact with real communication and is put in the active position to interpret the text to extract information. As the authors have reinforced:

“Literature can be thought of as a field which can be plowed for developing an understanding of language usage through different methods of

consciousness raising and form-focused instruction regarding particular grammatical structures, word forms and common expressions” (Bagherkazemi, Marzieh & Alemi, Minoo, 2010, p.4)

.1 ETHNIC STUDIES

According to Castle (2008), Ethnic Studies started in the nineteenth century with the work of African American writers who used theories about language, textuality, gender, among others categories, to reflect upon representation of black people's culture, and to question the identities that were applied to them.

From the perspective of Du Bois (Du Bois apud Castle, 2008), there is a partition in African Americans' self-image in which they see themselves by the demeaning look of the dominant group. This “double consciousness” can be found in Literature in books like *Native Son* by Richard's Wright and *The Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison.

One current that influenced Ethnic Studies and joined activists of many areas, such as Law, Philosophy, Political Science and Economy, was the critical race theory (CRT), formulated in the 1970s. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2023) the first CRT convention was held in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1989. The intellectual who first led the movement was Derrick Bell. Those social and political agents, especially the materialistic current inside CRT, investigated benefits from racism to dominant groups.

The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious(...)critical race theory examines the very foundations of the liberal order, including equity theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023,3)

Some of the main principles of critical race theory state that racism is a pattern in American society and influences all kinds of interaction. "Racism is ordinary, not aberrational 'normal science', the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country”(Delgado e Stefancic, 2023,8). The second tenant, is that there is an deliberate intention from the

segregationist groups: "most would agree that our system of white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material for the dominant group" (Delgado e Stefancic, 2023,8)

The third concept is that the race is a social, artificial and imposed construction that changes according to the interests of hegemonic classes: "races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient"(Delgado e Stefancic, 2023,9).

The Critical Race Theory denounced the political and ideological aspect that is base for the idea of race, and sustained by white and privileged people. They wanted to reveal the subtle racism that remained in society after the civil rights movement.

The movement embraced notions of Ethnic studies, like cultural nationalism, group cohesion. Their intention was, not only to question pillars of liberal society, like equality theory, rationalism and neutral principles, but also to transform society, uncovering the fact that racism is not an exception in human relations, but consists of its core and remains unseen. "It tries not only to understand our social situation, but to change it, setting out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better"(Delgado e Stefancic, 2023,8)

The idea of race is engendered by a dominant group, who benefits from it. There is an "interest convergence" from white people, who profit from racism and are responsible for the stereotypes that are applied to racialized African American people and also Latins, Asians and other minorities.

3.2 AFROCENTRISM

Created in the 1970's as political discourse and corollary for the Black Power Movement, Afrocentrism can be defined as a paradigm (Mazama, 2003), a perspective (Asante, 2007) that gives back to African people the agency and authority over their History, culture and lives. This approach questions European and North American imperialism, self-claimed superiority and the white privilege. According to Mazama, the whole symbolic construction about African culture, society,

and heritage were created by the dominant and colonizers that impose their view and lifestyle. Mazama (2001) suggests an academic perception that sees Afrocentrism as paradigm "Afrocentricity stresses the importance of cultivating a consciousness of victory as opposed to dwelling on oppression". (Mazama, 2001,389)

"It is not only physical slavery that dominates the history of America but the exploitation of the African through ideological impositions. Europe is insinuated into every aspect of black existence, even the sacred process of naming. Black discourse, therefore to be healthy discourse, is resistance" (Asante, 2004, p. 17)

As we can see, Asante advocates that the African-centered view can be applied to deconstruct every aspect of social life: politics, culture, economy, and also language. In the book *An Afrocentric Manifesto* (Asante, 2007), the intellectual defines the goals of his theory. "The sociolinguistics of racism and cultural imperialism have to be challenged and neutralized in order to produce an arena of respect where Africans assume more than marginal role in their discourses" (Asante, 2007). Asante points out the racist aspect of language and defies this construct in order to emerge another representation of black culture.

To Ama Mazama (2001), there is an influence of western society that needs to be untied from African people's mind. "Afrocentricity contends that our main problem as African people is our usually unconscious adoption of the Western worldview and perspective and their attendant conceptual frameworks".

In her systematization of Afrocentricity as paradigm, Mazama (2001) locates this "framework of beliefs" as the center of ideas that gives the apparatus to define its goals, methodology and academic borders. "Afrocentricity provided African American studies with the perspective, theories, and methods that define it as a discipline" (Mazama, 2001,396)

She is associate professor in the Department of African American Studies at Temple University, this academic structure were created with the leadership of Professor Asante, who started the first PhD programme in African American Studies in the decade of 1980. This place is seen by her as the origin of studies about Afrocentricity (Mazama, 2001,393).

The definition of Afrocentric point of view is assigned to Asante in ideas related to centrality of african experience that must redefine communicative, social, historical, cultural, political, economic, and psychological aspects in order to emancipate and set african american people from the prejudice and distortion caused by white supremacists. Mazama defends that the knowledge must change the minds and behavior of black people: “Afrocentric methodology must generate knowledge that will free us and empower us” (Mazama, 2001,399)

“From an Afrocentric perspective, where knowledge can never be produced for the sake of it but always for the sake of our liberation, a paradigm must activate our consciousness to be of any use to us [...] any set of ideas and practices is unable to move us and, in any case, remains largely irrelevant to our lives. The ultimate test will be our praxis .” (Mazama, 2001,392)

4-CRITICAL READING

A Raisin in the Sun can be considered one of the most known plays about black pride, racism and the American dream in the United States of America .The writer, Lorraine Hansberry, was born in Chicago, the same city where the play takes place. She made history when she became the first African American writer to be produced on Broadway. The play was inspired by her own life issues, including the situation when she and her family faced troubles while trying to move to an all-white-people neighborhood.

In 1950, Hansberry was an important voice in the Civil Rights Movement. She moved to Harlem and started to write in a Marxist journal called Freedom. In 1959, her play starred on Broadway and became a global success; it has been published and produced in over thirty languages across the globe.

It is worth for the sake of this analysis to present basic instances of the play. It is about the story of a black family, the Youngers, who work and live in Chicago in a poor house and have strenuous work to make their living. They receive life insurance from their dead patriarch and start to dream about having a house, studying and starting their own business. The context of racial segregation interferes in their plans and reveals the violence that surrounds them.

Their dreams, aspirations, and oppressions are the backbone of the play. The characters are Lena, the mother; Walter Lee, the older son; Beneatha, the youngest;

Ruth, Walter's wife and Travis, their son.

Through the story, discovering each one of them, we are guided into a complex human experience, facing the anguish, frustration, hopes and joy of a family. Hansberry story humanizes the black people, showing their pains, also their resistance like something that needs to be seen.

"I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor (Excerpt from *A Raisin in the Sun*, p.142)

The Ethnic studies will find place in many aspects of the play such as inferiorization of black people and their exploitation, white privilege, and alienation from material resources. The dialogue between Ruth and Lena show their aspiration and frustration for not having achieved a better life:

MAMA: But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back—(She waits and stops smiling) And didn't none of it happened. (Dropping her hands in a futile gesture) RUTH (Keeps her head down, ironing) Yes, life can be a barrel of disappointments, sometimes.(Excerpt from *A Raisin in the Sun*. p.48)

The disappointment that Walter Lee feels for not having material resources is clear in this passage:

Well, you tell that to my boy tonight when you put him to sleep on the living-room couch ... (Turning to MAMA and speaking directly to her) Yeah—and tell it to my wife, Mama, tomorrow when she has to go out of here to look after somebody else's kids. And tell it to me, Mama, every time we need a new pair of curtains and I have to watch you go out and work in somebody's kitchen. (Excerpt from *A Raisin in the Sun*, p.73)

Walter Lee desires having a better life, being an important businessman, but why can't he do it? What stops him? That is the answer the playwright provides and that can explain its roots in racism: "Sometimes it's like I can see the future stretched out in front of me—just plain as day. The future, Mama. Hanging over there at the edge of my days"(Hansberry, 1988, 76). This can be noticed when Walter Lee is confronted by his mother, Lena, about the reason he goes out and drink so often and he tries to explain his anguish. In that scene, the enormous public that watched the

play in many countries could understand how a black person feels and get into their shoes. Further in the same conversation between Lena and Walter Lee, melancholy, rage and social diagnosis came all together in lines like this one said by Walter: “I just sat there and watched the Negroes go by. And then I went to the Green Hat. You all sad? You all depressed?”(Hansberry, 1988, 106). This is one of the many aspects that show power relations into segregation present in Chicago after the Second World War. Despite poverty and racism, all members of the family keep their own personal dream. Beneatha wants to be a doctor, Ruth and Lena work to have a better house and Walter Lee wants to run his own business and stop working as a driver. When the family receives an inheritance from their passed dad, they can finally turn them into reality. This is an important representation that Hansberry conveys in the play: black people can dream, pursue a better life even living in a racist and a violent society.

When Lena finally decides to buy a house in Clybourne Park, a white district, they receive a visit from Karl Lindner, a white man, the representative of the residents. The man suggests that the “incidents” that happened before with colored people who also moved into a white neighborhood can also succeed with them and makes an offer to buy their house. This can be considered a subtle racism that is pointed out by ethnic studies. The man’s visit and his offer were intended to be friendly, but they were moved by a profound racial segregation that cleaved the society at that time. There was a representation of this white man that suggested cynicism and a soft threat.

“I am sure you people must be aware of some of the incidents which have happened in various parts of the city when colored people have moved into certain areas. Well, because we have what I think is going to be a unique type of organization in American community life, not only do we deplore that kind of thing—but we are trying to do something about it. We feel— (gaining confidence in his mission because of the interest in the faces of the people he is talking to)—we feel that most of the trouble in this world, when you come right down to it—(He hits his knee for emphasis)—most of the trouble exists because people just don’t sit down and talk to each other” (Excerpt from *A Raisin in the Sun*, p.45)

Another interesting point in the play that reinforces the theme of blackness in the play is that Lorraine Hansberry created three strong women, in different generations, who were completely different, but supported each other. All the three

female characters in the story have paradoxical behavior and personality. They are, at the same time, strong and determined, but also submissive to their family and what is expected from them as women.

Lena, the oldest generation of Younger's women, is the matriarch. Many years before, she fought for survival for black people, as can be seen in this excerpt of the conversation with his older son: "You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity"(Hansberry, 1988, 76).

With her husband, she raised their children, Beneatha and Walter Lee, and taught them to have pride and dreams. She works as a maid and, after receiving the insurance money, wants to buy a house for them. It is very symbolic that the two mothers in the story dream about a house, which represents protection to the family, and a material pursuit. When Walter Lee tries to convince her that money was what matters at that time, Lena contests reminding him of their family values.

No ... something has changed. (She looks at him) You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too (Excerpt from *A Raisin in the Sun*, p.45)

Ruth is the portrait of a black working mother. She represents the social injustices that they suffer for not having material to provide for their children. In the play, one of the things she wants the most is to have a house. It is very well represented, both in the play, how frustrated, sad and anguished Ruth is for working so hard for her family and living in such an unworthy place. She is submissive to her irresponsible husband, and has a good relationship with her mother in law, but when she gets pregnant for the second time, the play suggests that she wanted an abortion, against the will of her family.

Lena, her mother in law, tells her husband, Walter Lee, that she is pregnant and considers to stop the pregnancy:

"Son—do you know your wife is expecting another baby? (WALTER stands, stunned, and absorbs what his mother has said) That's what she wanted to talk to you about, (WALTER sinks down into a chair) This ain't for me to be telling—but you ought to know. (She waits) I think Ruth is thinking 'bout getting rid of that child."

She is very conservative and prude, but when misery is a bigger force, she is rational and progressive, using her right to decide for their body and life.

Beneatha is the voice of youth, with dreams and desire for change. She is a student and wants to be a doctor. Her main goal in life is to get education, make her own choices and not be only a wife. She embraces many social agendas, like anticolonialism, feminism, antiracism, as can be seen in these lines: “Get over it? What are you talking about, Ruth? Listen, I’m going to be a doctor. I’m not worried about who I’m going to marry yet—if I ever get married”. She questions the meaning of independence of African colonies. “Independence and then what? What about all the crooks and thieves and just plain idiots who will come into power and steal and plunder the same as before”.

In this character, Hansberry embraces the ideas of Afrocentrism. Beneatha wants to awaken another perspective about Africa in every member of her family, teasing them with lines like: “All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan”(Hansberry, 1988, 59).

Through these characters, the playwright reflects the criticism about North American cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism, which labels and stereotypes societies not based on capitalist relations as savage. Beneatha is also incisive about their opposition to assimilationist behavior of her peers, which is the idea of despising the cultural roots of a people and absorbing the one presented by the dominant group as: “It means someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case oppressive culture”(Hansberry, 1988, 83) , explains Beneatha.

The climax in Beneatha's story is when she wears African clothes and cuts her hair, choosing its natural shape and texture. In the sixties, the play brought up the idea of black self-esteem and beauty. The scene description reveals the tension in those who see her natural hair for the first time. “Beneatha looks at him and slowly, ceremoniously, lifts her hands and pulls off the headdress. Her hair is close-cropped and unstraightened” and after the reaction and criticism, she answers “How can something that’s natural be eccentric? (Hansberry, 1988, 82)”

5.ENHANCING READING SKILLS

In addition to revising literary analysis grounded in Ethnic Studies, this paper intends to present some aspects of critical reading in order to help EFL teachers to enhance the students interest in Literature. To this study, the generic guidelines of critical reading will be enough to introduce some pedagogical proposals.

To exercise reading skills and critical thinking ability, the student must be encouraged to interact with the text, bringing, along the reading, questions that could develop their own interpretation and reflections. According to Whitla (2010), seeking for patterns and creating their own view about the text are important procedures in the reading process.

Reading is a process of acquiring different kinds of information from any text, whether printed, electronic, musical or visual. As we read, we move through different levels of understanding, looking for patterns and developing hypotheses as we proceed. Critical reading at its simplest involves reading any text with interest, comprehension and a questioning frame of mind (Withla, 2010, p.28)

The same orientation is given by Pardede (2007) who proposes a four-step process to apply in the classroom: i) recognize the author's ideas; ii) analyze his assumptions; iii) detect the style or tone; iv) compare it with conflicting sources, as he states: "Critical reading can be defined as the process of understanding,questioning, and evaluating a text, which is carried out actively and consciously, in order to well assess the accuracy and validity of a writer's ideas" (Pardede, 2007,p.1)

6. FOR TEACHERS

According to Snow, Griffin and Burns (2005), reading activities can develop comprehension skills, enhance vocabulary and pronunciation. In this process the teacher has an important role of mediation and stimulation so the students can access their own knowledge and relate it to the subject in the reading. About the pedagogical contribution that teachers can deliver, the researchers explain:

The teachers encodes into speech that an author wrote and collaborates with the children so they can integrate information, infer and interpret

meaning, use and appreciate the text, and accomplish as least some part of their purposes for Reading in the first place. When students do more of the reading "all by themselves", the teacher fills in only when needed and prepares for more progress (Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005,15)

According to these researchers (Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005), the previous experience that a person had in life interferes directly in the comprehension of the reading material. The result of the reading and interpreting work will be different from one person to another. The teacher must consider and validate the ideas and feelings that can emerge from the literary analysis in the classroom.

Background knowledge is acquired through experience in action in the real world. Psychologists study background knowledge as mental representation that many call a "schema". Experiences and schemata about them are not neatly contained like words in written sentence, so how they are brought to bear on comprehending written material is not a simple matching exercise. Schemas have fuzzy borders, open spots, and different degrees of surety (or interfered with) by emotional responses, hunches, intuitions, or instincts and formed in the midst of social and cultural wisdom and biases. (Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005,23)

There are many advantages of teaching a second language through literary text. Some of them are highlighted by Gillian Lazar (1993) in her guide for teachers. Some of them are: motivation, emotional education, contact with another culture, expansion of language awareness, among others.

According to this researcher, there are factors that influence the reading experience and that must be taken into account when the teacher guides the reading and interpreting process. The students can be encouraged to identify and contrast the historical period when the story happens with the one they're living. The same way, the class position and religious beliefs of the reader and the character can be analyzed and compared.

Literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the reader/ learner is actively involved in 'teasing out' the unstated implications and assumptions of the text. [...] Trying to ascertain this significance provides an excellent opportunity for students to discuss their own interpretations, based on the evidence in the text. (Lazar, 1993,18)

The use of Literature in second language classes can provide a safe environment where the student can share feelings and emotions. Critical thinking can

also arise from workgroups and collective reading. "Using literature with our students may enable them to gain useful and often surprising perceptions about how the members of a society might describe or evaluate their experiences. (Lazar, 1993,17)

Some activities that can be developed by teachers are suggested by Lazar (1993) according to the students' proficiency level. Upper intermediate can rewrite parts of the text in reported speech, or fill verbs that were previously removed. The class can be asked to summarize the story or even interpreting a roleplay of the story (Lazar, 1993,23)

Detailed analysis of the language of the literary text will help students to make meaningful interpretations or informed evaluations of it. At the same time, students will increase their general awareness and understanding of English. Students are encouraged to draw on their knowledge of familiar grammatical, lexical or discursal categories to make aesthetic judgements of the text.(Lazar, 1993,23)

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through the development of the research, we could find a vast field of theories and methods that can be explored to teach Literature in ESL. There are solid and tested pedagogical paths that can help teachers and students in reading experience.

It was also found that there is also a whole syllabus in Ethnic Studies that wasn't possible to explore, due to the time and extension of this study. There is a limitation to academic resources as articles and books that aren't free and accessible to find, and their presence in the bibliography might be missed. This aspect can be seen also as a possibility and potential of new developments.

Despite that, the idea of analyzing the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry, and presenting a display of antiracist ideas was fruitful and opened a range of reflections that can find in the classroom the place, and in the students the agents of critical thinking. The wider look to social, political and cultural aspects that produce language in its all forms proved its centrality in the social debate.

This said, we expect that this research might introduce EFL/ESL teachers and students to literary analysis and a critical view that might sharpen their look to the oppressions, social injustices, symbolic misrepresentations of minorities and themselves as social and political actors in the world, also we hope to in the future

explore more deeply other academic fields, concepts, models and paradigms about literary analysis.

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