Identity through Language: Use of African American English in the Plays of Lorraine Hansberry

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ABSTRACT

African Americans developed a cultural identity different from mainstream American culture primarily through their language. Many language forms were used by the African Americans. All forms are equally valid but the one basic form spoken by the large number of African Americans is the English spoken in south side Chicago. It has been noted that when African American English sounds ungrammatical to the White ear, it is merely conforming to its own rules. This paper proposes to discuss African American English as a medium for the transmission of culture and identity with reference to Lorraine Hansberry’s two plays: A Raisin in the Sun and The Drinking Gourd. Hansberry uses her own patterns of pronunciation, vocabulary, and usage to restore the dignity of her fallen race and to convey the distinct and unique nature of their culture.

Keywords: African Americans, American culture, White ear, Fallen race, Culture.

In 1969 a demonstrator in New York was found carrying a sign: “To grow up decent, our children need new clothing to present themselves in school in proper neat! The sun have to shine for our children too. Amen” (Sixth volume of the New York Times Magazine Dillard “Education: Black English”) (6). The demonstrator’s placard does not simply “denote” the Blacks’ demand for bare necessities; it represents the struggle of the Blacks to hold on to their cultural identity through “Black English”, a dialect which sounded ungrammatical to the White ear but is merely conforming to its own rules.

African American English retained some African words that later entered Standard English (examples: goober, jazz and banjo). Their English does not differentiate between genders of pronouns, so it is perfectly correct for a speaker to say, “He a nice little girl” (http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0, 9171,879171,00.html). In unravelling these rules, however, linguists encounter a problem—almost nobody speaks “pure” African American English. When African Americans living in ghettos hear their speech being scorned by the whites as illiterate, they often try to “improve” it by trying to bring it somewhat closer to Standard English.

The origins and rules of African American English have always remained a mystery. Scholars once thought their language was either an ignorant misuse of Standard
English or a remnant of archaic British dialects learned by slaves from their southern masters. Lately, however, a number of linguists have come to believe that the dialect originated among the slaves themselves. Linguist J. L. Dillard of the University of Puerto Rico, in his full-length book *Black English*, has described how slaves were forced to develop their own lingua franca because traders usually separated groups speaking the same language in order to hinder communication and thereby prevent revolts. Even though this happened, the slaves managed to teach each other pidgin varieties of their master’s language.

Lorraine Hansberry was the first African American playwright who was able to bring her people to the theatre. She was a gifted playwright and activist who set the benchmark for many future African American writers. The language that Hansberry uses in her African American plays: *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Drinking Gourd* is simple, and gives a heart wrenching account of all that she and her race were subjected to. Their speech is colloquial with its own sense of rhythm, departing from realistic speech into the lyrical. It is significant to note that her 1959 Broadway play *A Raisin in the Sun* is set in “free” America when Negros had the freedom to learn to read and write. By 1862, slavery had legally been abolished and hence most Negroes could make use of the opportunity to study Standard English.

Steven R. Carter in *Hansberry’s Drama: Commitment and Complexity*, states that in her essay *The Negro writer and his Roots: Towards a New Romanticism*, Hansberry has commented: The speech of our people has been the victim of hostile years and commentary. That there are tones and moods of language that the African tongue prefers, escapes attention, when that attention would demand admiration of beauty and colour rather than mere amusement or derision. The educated are expected to apologise for the slurrings that haunt our speech: the mark of ascendancy is the absence of a recognizable Negro idiom or inflection. It is an attitude that we should most admire the peacock when he has lost his colors. (28-29)

The language spoken by many of Hansberry’s characters in most of her plays is non-standard English. Although their dialect is similar to white southern dialect, there is a distinct difference, as it is mostly an outgrowth of slavery. Most of these African Americans were people who migrated from the south. At that time, slaves were forbidden a formal education and therefore they mimicked whatever English they heard, thereby ending up with “Pidgin English” not unlike the English spoken by many Native Americans. Hansberry reproduces the language of her people and their diverse speech patterns in her first and most famous play *A Raisin in the Sun*. The language used by the “Younger family” strikes us with its visionary and poetic impact.

Throughout *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry shows how her characters speak the unconventional South Side Chicago non-standard English. The play centres on the “Younger family” and shows how Big Walter, the father has left behind a $10,000 life insurance cheque for his family. In 1959, $10,000 was a large sum of money, considering that the average house in Chicago was sold for $ 7,500 and a public school teacher’s salary was about $ 3,000. During such difficult times, Big Walter had worked himself to death in order to provide the insurance money so that his family could get the opportunities he never got. All the members of his family who are discriminated against in free America have their own plans for the money. Lena Younger, the wife of Big Walter wants to invest some of the money on Beneatha’s medical education and some on a down payment for an apartment. Her son Walter Lee, a frustrated chauffeur wants the money to start a liquor business. The liquor business had a high potential for destroying the African American community. In the play, Mama manages to lure her son away from the dream of starting a liquor business.

The manner of speaking in the play is revealed through the conversation of the characters. They speak the English of the working class: minimal inflection of verb forms, for example: teacher say; double and triple negatives example “Ruth to Walter: Oh, no he ain’t going to be up no earlier no such thing!” (10); dropped letters example “Ruth to Travis: I ain’t got no fifty cents this morning” (12), unusual diction example “somewheres”. Their English is lucid, expressive, poetic and realistic. As Steven R. Carter has stated: “Walter’s comic, poetic, male-chauvinist lament ‘Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs’ is one of the most memorable speeches in modern
drama” (26). Walter continues: (Sadly, but gaining in power) “Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work” (17).

Education can change and modify speech patterns and Hansberry is equally adept in handling the speech patterns of her educated African American characters like Beneatha and Asagai. The English that they speak is more sophisticated than the speech of the rest of the “Younger family”. Beneatha’s English is formal, conditioned by her education though she occasionally uses slang words like “Brother is a flip” (33). Beneatha’s correct use of Standard English is revealed when she tells her boyfriend, Asagai: “Oh, Asagai! . . . You got them for me! How beautiful…and the records too!” (45). Though Asagai’s English is similar to that of Beneatha’s, it incorporates a wider range of vocabulary, with words like “retrogression”. He at times exhibits signs of his heritage when he speaks. When Beneatha shows her happiness on receiving the robe and the records, Asagai tells her “I shall have to teach you how to drape it properly. (He flings the material about her for the moment and stands back to look at her) Ah – Oh – Pay – gay – day, oh – gbah – mu – shay, (A Yoruba exclamation for admiration). You wear it well…very well…mutilated hair and all” (45). Asagai does not have colloquial expressions when he speaks but his speech is real, has pauses, emphasis, and sounds exactly like conversational English.

Hansberry tries to show how the “Younger family” is struggling to educate Beneatha and Travis but when the cheque finally arrives, Mama asks Travis “Travis! (she is counting off with doubt) Is that the right number of zeros?” (53). When the $10,000 cheque finally arrives, Travis looks at the cheque and replies “Yes’m…ten thousand dollars. Gaalee, Grand-mama, you rich” (53). Travis’ response shows that like Beneatha his English also contains slangs.

George Murchison who is also Beneatha’s boyfriend is a man who has assimilated himself totally within the American culture, and speaks the kind of African American English, college going students speak but at the same time he speaks an English similar to the Americans. When Walter asks him what he is being taught at college, George replies: “You’re all wacked up with bitterness, man” (69). Later he tells Beneatha: “You’re a nice-looking girl . . . Guys aren’t going to go for the atmosphere – they’re going to go for what they see . . . Drop the Garbo routine. It doesn’t go with you. As for myself, I want a nice – (Groping) – simple (Thoughtfully) – sophisticated girl…not a poet – O.K?” (80).

Hansberry uses language to point out differences in character and their background. She makes ample use of language to depict the variety and diversity that is so much a part of African American English. The speech of her characters varies remarkably from one another. It is often poetic, metaphorical, lively, dramatic, vigorous and sometimes pompous and stilted. Whatever it is they subtly delineate character. Both her African American plays A Raisin in the Sun and The Drinking Gourd amply demonstrate the fact. In A Raisin in the Sun, Walter Lee, an uneducated chauffeur is highly pessimistic at the beginning of the play. He keeps on lamenting his plight and his language poetically demonstrates the fact. He tells Murchison: “Here I am a giant—surrounded by ants! Ants who can’t even understand what it is the giant is talking about (69). When Mama hands over the money to Walter, his spirit soars and he shouts dramatically to Travis: “Just tell me, what it is you want to be—and you’ll be it . . . Whatever you want to be—Yessir! (He holds his arms open for Travis) You just name it, son . . . (Travis leaps into them) and I hand you the world” (93). The language is lucid, expressive and poetic.

Hansberry herself commented on the language in the play and said that when Mama asks Walter whether he is really going to ask Lindner for the money, he says “Captain, Mistah, Boosman . . . A-hee-hee-hee! Oh, yassah boss! Yassssssuh! Great White Father, just gi’ ussen de money fo’ God’s sake, and we’d ain’t gwine come out deh and dirty up yo’ white folks neighborhood” (128). In fact no contemporary African American would generally use such language. He grovels, grins and wrings his hands in a profoundly ironic anguished imitation of the slow-witted movie stereotype. Through such passages Hansberry shows how Walter moves from his own African American idiom to other forms. Even when he talks to Murchison, he expresses his combined envy and contempt for Murchison and other “college boys” by commenting: “I see you all the time—with the books tucked
under your arms—going to your . . . they teaching you how to be a man? How to take over and run the world? . . . Naw—just to talk proper and read books and wear them faggoty-looking white shoes . . . .”(68-69).

Later when he turns Lindner’s offer down, he uses African American idioms that is neither pretentious nor demeaning. It is not Standard English, but his words are expressed in the beautiful way Hansberry had heard migrants from the South express themselves. He tells him in proper southern English: “we have decided to move into our house because—my father—my father—he earned it for us brick by brick . . . ”(131-132).

Lena Younger, known as Mama throughout the play is practical, down to earth and declares her views in an authoritative manner. Hansberry felt that women like Mama were the backbone of the race. A role thrust on them since the time of slavery. In the play, Mama upbraids Walter for wanting to start a liquor business. She tells him: (Quietly) I don’t ‘low no yellan’ in this house, Walter Lee, and you know it—(Walter stares at them in frustration and starts to speak several times) And there ain’t going to be no investing in no liquor stores” (54). Often she presents Big Walter as the ideal father and man in front of her son. When she speaks to Ruth about her past life with Big Walter, she becomes reflective and dreamy: “a fine man—just couldn’t never catch up with his dreams, that’s all” (30).

However the two most vibrant speeches in the play are uttered in African American English. When Walter first informs Lena that he is going to accept Lindner’s offer, she responds: MAMA: Son— 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. (Raising her eyes and looking at him) We ain’t never been that—dead inside. (127)

The best use of African American English is seen when Walter defies the whites who are trying to keep them out of Clybourne Park. He tells Karl Lindner: “we don’t want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes” (132). On the surface he is calm and he assures the white man that he will not make trouble but otherwise he hints things may turn out different. Carter asserts that June Jordan in Civil Wars declares: “Our Black language is a political fact suffering from political persecution and political malice. Let us understand this and meet the man, politically; let us meet the man talking the way we talk; let us not fail to seize this means to our survival, despite white English and its power” (Carter 28). Walter thus turns his back on White racist tradition boldly standing up to them. He has his traditions, race, pride and family behind him to carry on the struggle.

The language used in The Drinking Gourd, a play set in the antebellum south also makes an interesting study. The play is set at a time when the African Americans were not allowed to read and write. The slaves came from different parts of Africa and from different cultures speaking different languages. Hence, in order to communicate they had to imitate their masters and create a kind of English that they could all understand. That language came to be conditioned by their African culture and American experience. It had many more words than the plantation vocabulary. It was enriched by ambiguity, poetry, simplicity, variety and realism. It had a beautiful rhythmic flow. African American English was in the making.

Just as we see in A Raisin in the Sun, the uneducated characters in Hiram’s plantation speak the crude but nevertheless poetic form of African American English. The myth of the “contented” slave that the white man perpetrated probably to ease his conscience is seen in all its beauty and simplicity in the first scene of The Drinking Gourd, where the six year old Tommy teaches Hannibal to read and write, while Hannibal teaches him to play the Banjo. The scene is calm and serene but the myth is exploded when Everett comes upon the two and blinds Hannibal for breaking a slave code. Everett tells Hannibal:EVERETT (Truly outraged): You have used your master’s own son to commit a crime against your master. How long has this been going on? Who else have you taught, boy? Even my father wouldn’t like this, Hannibal. (197)

Sarah and Rissa have accepted their plight as slaves. Sarah tells Hannibal at the beginning “you better hush your mouth for sure now, boy. Trees on this plantation got more ears than leaves!” (233). Rissa in The Drinking Gourd is portrayed as a African American mammy who owes absolute
allegiance to the white household. Initially she feels that it is her duty to obey the master. She cares for her master and does all that she can to make his life longer and happier. She acquiesces in the fact that slaves should not read and write. Like Mama in *A Raisin in the Sun*, she believes in God and his grace. She is conscious of what is right but the change in Rissa from the traditional mammy of the myth to the rebellious mother occurs when her son Hannibal is blinded by Hiram’s son Everett. Though she knows that her master has been all along a good man and a kind one, she is not able to forgive him. Like Lena Younger, she too becomes an emotional mother fiercely protective of her own flesh and blood. Hiram tries to ask her for his forgiveness and points out that he had nothing to do with this. RISSA (For the first time looking up at him): “Why? Ain’t you Marster? How can a man be master of some men and not at all of others—. . . Will your overseer gouge out my eyes too? (Shrugging) . . . I done seen all there was worth seein’ in this world—and it didn’t ‘mount to much.” (306)

Rissa literally orders him out as she tells him abruptly “I think this talkin’ disturb my boy” (306). The myth of the mammy is subverted as Rissa steals her master’s gun and hands it to Sarah, assisting her son to escape with Joshua and Sarah. She becomes the simple human mother with feelings and emotions and prepares to sacrifice herself for her own family. The mother changes from mammy to militant.

One mark of deep southern speech in *The Drinking Gourd* is the embedded tenses of verbs. Rissa tells Hiram “don’t be akin’ Riss’ to hep you none”; Sarah says, “Coffin know everything”; Hannibal says, “the more pain it give . . . the more Hannibal be a man!” Unlike Standard English, “be askin’,” “know,” and “be” as spoken here suggest a complexity of thought and action. Hannibal is really saying, I am a man, I will be a man, I will continue being a man” (121).

Hiram and Zeb are also uneducated. Hiram’s son Everett is ashamed of his father’s ignorance. Hiram is not able to communicate and share his thoughts and memories either with his wife (who sides with his son) or with his own son. Instead he finds a soul mate in Rissa, one of his first slaves. His language is very similar to that of Rissa’s but because of his wide experience, he is able to give expression to philosophical ideas which neither his educated son or his doctor, Macon Bullet can appreciate. Hiram wonders if all life is a lie. He tells Dr. Bullet: “I think every man that draws breath on this earth has those hours when—well—when, by God, he wonders why the stars hang out there and this planet turns and rivers run—and what he’s here for” (253). Zeb’s speech on the other hand has several similarities to the speech of the slaves. He uses words like “ants,” “I reckon”. His language reveals his poor state but it is not poetic. As Anne Cheney point out in *Lorraine Hansberry*: “Lacking the poetry of slaves and masters alike, Zeb Dudley’s speech is as barren and wasted as the soil he tills” (122).

Everett is the educated son of Hiram. He speaks perfect Standard English but he is neither imaginative nor wise. Neither is his language poetic. It is just prose unadorned by any great thought. Only once does he speak in a dramatic fashion and that is when he repeats Zeb’s phrase “I reckon” and warns him “you had better reckon on knowing who is master here and who is merely an overseer” (291). Otherwise as he goes around barking out his orders, he is cruel and cold-blooded especially when he orders the blinding of Hannibal, his attitude is cruel and exacerbated. He tells Hannibal: “There is only one thing I have ever heard of that was proper for an ‘educated’ slave. It is like any-thing else; when a part is corrupted by disease—” (297).

Hannibal is the most educated character in the play though he has not gone to any fancy institutions. He is capable of fine thoughts and great sentiments. Right from the beginning of the play, he can only think of freedom. He wonders about life, the world, and humanity. The homework that he does for Tommy about the “Drinking Gourd” is an example of his poetic and thoughtful approach to life. Whenever he gazes up at the stars, he feels something happening inside him, which is bigger than “whatever a man is” (295) He feels like King Jesus, “racing through the world telling me to stand up on the glory which is called—freedom” (295). Despite the spelling mistakes and grammar mistakes, this is a thoughtful man who has imagination and philosophy deep down inside. Elizabeth-Brown Guilory quotes the New York Times critic Brook Atkinson who commented: “She has told the inner as well as the outer truth about a Negro family in the Southside Chicago
at the present time . . . . A Raisin in the Sun has vigour as well as veracity and is likely to destroy the complacency of any one who sees it” (38). This can be said also about The Drinking Gourd, a play through which she had the courage to proclaim the truth about slavery. Through her African American plays, A Raisin in the Sun and The Drinking Gourd, Lorraine Hansberry uses her race’s own patterns of pronunciation, vocabulary, and usage to disrupt the common American notion of African Americans as lazy, uneducated, mammys, a race without identity, culture or dreams. She shows how language is powerful and can give people a sense of identity. Steven R. Carter in his book Hansberry’s Drama: Commitment and Complexity quotes Hansberry’s own words: “Language symbols, spoken and written, have permitted Man to abstract his awareness of the world and transmit his feelings about it to his fellows . . . . That may be the most extraordinary accomplishment in the universe for all we know . . . .” (153). Through her plays, she shows how language is a powerful tool that can give people a sense of identity.

In recent decades, the United States has continued to expand, in part due to new waves of immigration from various parts of the world including South America, and Africa. Hence the African American language as studied and celebrated by Lorraine Hansberry in the 1960s, continues to be more and more important and relevant to American culture even today. Dr. Gail L. Thompson, professor at the Claremont Graduate University shares the experiences of her own educated children. In 2004 she stated: “My new theory is that African Americans refuse to speak Standard English for self-preservation” (142). Preserving the vitality of the African American’s rich, vibrant speech is the best legacy that Lorraine Hansberry has left behind.
References


