
**ANALYZING THE RHETORIC OF LANGUAGE IN
AUGUST WILSON'S "FENCES"**

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ABSTRACT

The use of emotive language whether in the form of metaphoric language, songs or poems also adds to the wealth of the language in Wilson's "Fences." This has also acted as a means of salvation amongst the black Americans. These provide some solace to the depressed African Americans that are yet to entertain rights which the Whites have been enjoying. Although this may not be directly stated, the songs entail true callings of African Americans who are yearning for a life which offers them more hopes and dreams but the songs also have a certain tone of acceptance. Critical race theory, translingualism and feminism give us frameworks for analyzing the use of language critically.

Keywords: Critical race theory, feminism, language, translingualism

Fences by August Wilson is a realistic play that dissects the life of an 'ordinary' black man whose image portrayal is larger than life. A black American with some notable sporting background, Troy has certain special traits in his character that make Fences a compulsive read. Set against the backdrop of racial prejudice in the U.S, the play displays various facets of Afro American life. However, it would be unfair to maintain that the play is just confined to Afro-American parameters as it also explores an array of psychic and social developments of an individual living in those times. The conflict, be it inter-personal or intra-personal, wreaks havoc in the life of some characters such as Troy, Rose and Cory. With some others, however, things seem to be pretty stagnant; this happens with Bono and Lyons. The air of confusion, in profusion, culminates in changed relations and unpredictability of human characters. This is evident with Troy's persona. All the characters in the play have their own pre-conceived notions about various dimensions of human life and the way they interact with each other is interestingly observed. Apart from the study of intricate human relationships, another area of

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interest in the play could be the richness of the employed language that not simply adds to the foundation of the plot but is also responsible for injecting life in to the play. The use of Afro American dialects-make the play so lively that you can nearly hear the characters engaged in animated talks with each other rendezvous, and almost communicate with them two ways. This is analogous to “Constructing nontraditional rhetoric: Critical study on Gloria Anzaldua and Suresh Canagarajah” by Suresh Lohani (2019). In this article Lohani talks about a famous scholar, Gloria Anzaldua, who too believes in making generous use of her variant of Spanish into English language. Lohani, talking about her use of language, states that “this can be clearly seen to be operating with Anzaldua’s case as her voice and actions are inseparably tied to her cultural ideology” (p.119).

The language of the play incorporates emotive expressions, slangs, a lot of sexual humor, songs and animated conversations. Although the Afro American dialect makes the play a little complicated to grasp in some places, its rich flavor keeps the readers glued throughout the script and entertains them; not simply through cheap humor but also by means of intellectually awakening insights. This can largely be accorded to the African American culture that has its own grammars and traditions that govern the actions of the characters in the play.Suresh Lohani (2019) in *Scholar’s Social Studies and Creative Arts* discusses culture in regards to how it shapes our behavior and posits the ways in which culture has direct implications in our lifestyle (p.339). However, he is also careful to caution how traditional discriminatory practices that branch out from culture should be tactfully avoided.

It compels the reader to delve into themselves in search of a greater meaning of some incomprehensible yet natural phenomena which they might not have assessed hitherto. The dialogues spoken by all the characters have some degree of similarity in terms of expression of feelings. However, the connotation is markedly different in almost all of them depending on the difference in context and time. The language in the play also functions as a means of achieving different emotional objectives associated with the psychology of different characters.

To begin with, the Afro American dialects are very spicy and greatly appeal to normal human ears. Defying the conventions of standard English, there are ample examples where the derivatives of the language are interestingly put into practice .With certain words spelt and spoken unlike typical English largely practiced by stereotypical English community, for example, ‘Where she come from anyway (p. 195), the reader enjoys the spectacle of wide range of experimented vocabulary and expressions that preserve the uniqueness of the dialect. The use of double negation such as, ‘I don’t miss nothing (p. 195)’ does not sound unreal and the use of slangs such as ‘Get your black ass out of my yard (p. 218)’only provide the play a more natural flavor where expressions are not chained into boring rules of grammar and vocabulary.

In this context, it is important to mention Ashok Bhusal's (2017) work titled "The rhetoric of racism and anti-miscegenation laws in the United States" in which he clearly states that "What is necessary at this point is, with the tools offered in critical race theory, is to complete a deeper study of minorities and bring their stories, their voices, into academic scholarship" (p. 88). In bringing minority stories into attention, we need to talk about their language and culture and show the necessity of preserving their linguistic and cultural differences. Racism prevalent in our society is hindering us from embracing differences as Bhusal (2019) in "The rhetoric of racism in society" mentions that "racism is responsible for the minorities [questioning] their identities and [putting down] their own traditions to acquiesce to the majority" (p. 114). Bhusal encourages us to "combat racism" (p. 114) by respecting other cultures and languages.

While feminism has to do with highlighting female voices, critical race theory provides a framework for all racial minorities. It is important to avoid racist and sexist languages in any text we write and any text we choose to use for teaching purposes. In addition, it is important to highlight the achievements of minorities in our society. In "Emphasizing the suppression of feminist voices," Ashok Bhusal (2017) emphasizes contributions of four female rhetoricians in rhetorical study. His point is that "Because of sexist and racist perspectives, their literary and rhetorical gifts were discredited and were not included in traditional historical study" (p. 56). Often the perspectives towards minorities, whether they are racial or gender minorities, nursed by society go against the rights enshrined to them by legal documents of the state. Suresh Lohani (2016) in "LGBTI in Nepal, Pakistan, and India: Law, Religion, and Individuals" states that "translation of constitution and legality into the social level is also missing point in the context of Nepal, which has its own hazards" (p.38). Thus, when written legal documents are overshadowed by societal practices, marginal voices continue to be suppressed and this holds true in the case of female voices that have been rendered mute by patriarchal framework constructed and nurtured since ages.

The language in 'Fences' also creates a certain ambience in the play. It is responsible for the life like description of the setting and the plot, for instance, 'It is Friday...(p.194)'. The spontaneity of ideas and meticulous choice of words bring into light the scene which otherwise might not have transcended Wilson's mind. The Porch, the garden, the fence, the bat and the kitchen come dancing before the reader's eyes. The words and phrases such as 'You see this Bono (page207) and 'Troy starts into the house (p. 216)' minutely showcase the setting which cannot just be fictitious. These are the settings our eyes have become accustomed to and help the readers in actually penetrating into the space they occupy. In addition, the language and expressions also help in creating fluctuations of the play and directly lead to the creation of series of tensions, such as, 'But I held on to you Troy... (p. 214)'. The words that come out through the lips of the characters are not merely utterances of mundane conversations but also reflect to a large extent

the dominant mood in the play. The words and phrases justly manifest the air of joy, light-heartedness, (as in one of the acts, Troy wants to kiss Rose and is vocal about it) intra-and inter personal conflicts rampant from the start till the end. This is strengthened by employment of words and phrases such as, ‘Troy, why don’t you hush that talk (p. 197)’ as uttered by Rose at the beginning and by Troy Maxson such as, ‘Aw hell, woman. Bono... (p. 198)’ and by Bono likewise in one of the scenes. The language dominates all brands of moods and makes them almost perceptible for the audience to feel. When Troy talks to Bono at the beginning, the air of joviality is sensed. Their candid talks reflect on their struggle and certain traces of nostalgia are exhibited. The fact that they had been together since a long time ago is echoed by words and phrases such as, ‘As long as you know me....(p.195) and ‘Troy...I done know.....(p. 211). This could be one of the salient features of Afro American dialect that does not perhaps believe in beating about the bush and makes short, sharp and honest expressions. The expansive nature of both Troy and Bono is apparently realized through the use of words and phrases such as ‘Yeah I appreciate that Bono (p. 212) and ‘The old folks... (p. 211)’ The dialogues also synchronize the thoughts and perceptions of Troy and Bono. However, it is also this very language that demarcates the personality of Bono and Troy. Through the words pronounced by Bono do we come to know that Troy is more of an ideal to Bono than the latter being to Troy. In fact, Bono is more of Troy’s confidant and looks up to Troy for certain singularities of life. What Troy Maxson enacts is largely the outcome of his own discretion and it is quite clear that he is a man of his own principles; he does what his heart deems is right and this is exemplified through words and phrases such as ‘I stood on the first base for eighteen years....(p. 214)’ and ‘They will be on the other side of that fence (p. 218); as for Bono concerned, he seems to be a man of conventions and a man of acceptance. Whatever has been in the practice is what he complies to. This is illustrated through words and phrases such as ‘You got to be good to play (p. 210)’ and ‘Tell you what I’ll do...(p. 212)’. He is devoid of mutiny in life and does not hold any radical views.

However, when it comes to advising Troy tacitly, his intellect and understanding of life comes into visibility. Though soft in tone, he strongly cautions Troy against betraying his wife, Rose, who Bono views as a woman of substance. Words and phrases such as ‘She loves you Troy (p. 212) and ‘Work it out right, Troy (p. 212)’ illustrate his pragmatism and these also challenge Troy’s ideals. This is one such domain in which Bono seems to be standing taller than Troy. The dialogues delivered by Rose also exhibit the polished personality that she is enveloped in, ‘Don’t you think I had dreams and hopes? ‘You take....and don’t even know... (p, 214)’. Although she does not possess sound academic background, the words that come out of her lips seem to have a mix of experience and wit, ‘Times have changed... (p. 196). At the beginning Rose is very humorous and participates on equal footing when Bono and Troy share some light hearted moments. She is one of the group and comfortably partakes in the conversation and adds to the

humorous environment. The words and phrases such as, 'I told him if he wasn't marrying kind...page (196)' expose that trait of her persona. However, as time rolls by, what she speaks associates her more with the worldly affairs where dissatisfactions and grievances subtly surface and the disappointing tone is intertwined with her soft words. For example, 'Troy, you ought not talk like that... (p. 196)'. The change that has come in the tone of Cory also is linked to his character transformation. In the early acts, Cory is so compliant and submissive to his father. His dreams succumb to his father's decisions and he is not in a position to be vocal about it. Cory is totally scared of his father and despite wanting to, cannot defy his impulse. Cory also is highly courteous towards his father and Troy wants to make sure that his son speaks to him in a respectable manner, 'Yessir (p. 202)'. He can never tolerate Cory's indecent words and upon his refusal to say 'excuse me' to him while wanting to enter the house, he kicks him out of his house. There is a certain degree of mutiny in Cory's voice when he confronts his father. The words such as, 'I ain't going nowhere !...I ain't scared of you (p. 218)' act as evidence to this. His words also sternly oppose Troy's dominance in the household and he strongly wants to disconnect himself with his father's unjustifiable whims. However, with the passage of time Cory too seems to have matured in terms of expression of his views. When he returns for his father's funeral, he seems to have evolved into a mature young man who is very balanced with his views.

'Fences' also is rich in sexual humor. Troy in particular seems to be very open with the use of words and phrases that have explicit sexual connotations and this seems to go very well in Afro American community. Everyone in the family whether it is a woman or children, sexual humor seems to have a prominent role in their discussions and interactions .At the beginning, for example, Troy asks Bono not to disturb him on a Monday morning as he would be sexually engaged and does not want to be disturbed, '.....Don't you come by my house Monday morning.....still gonna be stroking! (p.199)'. This type of sexually charged humor is recurrent in several other acts in the play, 'Legs don't mean nothing....(p. 195)'. The presence of sexual elements in conversations might not be well taken in certain sub-cultures. However, with African Americans, they act as a binding force which synchronizes diverse layers of thoughts and perceptions. Talks blended with sex help ease family tensions and rows and provide a secure outlet to internal suffocations. There are also instances when the subject of sex is indirectly incorporated and linked to natural affiliation to manhood. This also is linked to family issues and has been accepted as a tool that keeps the relationship between husband and the wife intact and if mishandled could lead to a serious breakdown in the family. What rose says to Troy, '.. you ought to have stayed upstairs in my bed where you belong (p. 213)' suggests its prominence in the play. Sex might be easily accepted in the conversations but its application in real life in the form of infidelity will have devastating repercussions.

The tone in the text suggests that Afro Americans have more or less become fatalistic and learned to make adjustments alongside the White supremacy. The grudges which Troy seems to have towards the Whites in connection with his sports career that could never take a full shape, are soothed by songs which he hums on a number of occasions, ‘Please ,Mr Engineer...(p. 216)’. These songs also mark some transformation in the major characters such as Troy and Cory. When Troy, for instance, holds his baby daughter in his hands and sings ‘ Please ,Mr Engineer.....’, we see the fragile side of him and more of a father deeply concerned about his baby daughter’s safety. His gruff exterior fails to hide his inner frailty. The song also shows that despite his direct ways of dealing with his wife initially, he now makes an indirect appeal to her through his song so that she might let him and his daughter enter the house .His dominance in the family is clearly lost to Rose who uses certain rhetoric such as ‘Okay, Troy.....A motherless child has got a hard time...From right now....this child has got a mother .But you a womanless man. (p. 216)’ to imply that he is no longer her husband and the boss in the family. Another character in the play that also resorts to songs is Gaberiel, Troy’s brother. The song is also instrumental in bringing the scattered family under the same umbrella. For instance, when Cory and Raynell sing together “Hear it ring....Blue treed a possum in Noah’s Ark” (p. 221), the divide in the family is bridged to a certain extent as the song helps them harmonize their feelings; this also connects them to a common figure, Troy, who fathers them both. These scattered threads of the family are linked through the medium of music.

The language, therefore, plays a crucial role in making ‘Fences’ a memorable drama that will continue to appeal to the readers for generations to come. Dramatic dialogues in some acts and scenes will transport the readers to a new realm of self realization and keep them pondering on issues related to discrimination on the ground of the color. The drama is an artistic mix of love, conflicts and human aspirations and these are clearly manifested through a variety of dialogues that constitute similes, songs and metaphoric expressions. The uniqueness of Afro American dialects further heightens the appeal of the play thereby genuinely overshadowing and substituting the dull conversations of everyday life. The strength of the language is visible in the setting, plot and characterization of the play and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the language in the play is the actual soul of the play.

In the context of teaching, it is important to embrace a translingual approach. Ashok Bhusal and others’ (2018) *guidebook multilingual students in writing classes: A Guide for teaching and learning*. It provides helpful tips for guiding multilingual students. One of the highlights of this book is a discussion of the importance of multimodality in the undergraduate classroom. As Bhusal (2019) defines in “Addressing FYC instructors' lack of technological expertise in implementing multimodal assignments, multimodality indicates “multiple modes of communication -- textual, aural, visual, and spatial” (p. 167). Suresh Lohani (2019) also talks

about multimodality in “The History of Multimodal Composition, Its Implementation, and Challenges.” Lohani contends that “Multimodality, speaking from the translingual perspective, is a challenge to autonomous orientation to literacy that advocates for the conformation to the dominant language conventions” (p.124). He thus stresses the idea that translingualism is better explained by multimodality. This points to the idea that multimodal composition practices could be empowering tools for voices muted hitherto.

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