



VCRasin__DSC7477, kabelphoto

From Power-over to Power-to: Power Relations of Women in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

JOSÉ ROBERTO SARAVIA VARGAS
University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica

ABSTRACT: Because of binary oppositions shaping Western thought, power has been traditionally understood as male domination or as an unevenly distributed social resource between genders. However, an analysis of the power relationships of the three women in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in the light of Derrida's thought shows that these notions do not take into account the dynamism and complexity of power relations and hints to the establishment of a new idea of power: transformative power.

KEYWORDS: theater, Lorraine Hansberry, Derrida, *A Raisin in the Sun*, power

RESUMEN: A causa de las oposiciones binarias que estructuran el pensamiento occidental, se ha entendido el poder tradicionalmente como dominación masculina o como un recurso social distribuido inequitativamente entre los géneros. No obstante, un análisis de las relaciones de poder de las tres mujeres en *A Raisin in the Sun*, de Lorraine Hansberry, basado en el pensamiento de Derrida, muestra que dichas nociones no toman en cuenta el dinamismo ni la complejidad en las relaciones de poder y sugiere el establecimiento de una nueva idea de poder: el poder transformativo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: teatro, Lorraine Hansberry, Derrida, *A Raisin in the Sun*, poder



A Raisin in the Sun, by US playwright Lorraine Hansberry, has been appraised as an important contribution to feminism, for it discloses the gender roles active at that time. *A Raisin in the Sun* depicts the struggles of the Younger family in a poor black neighborhood in Chicago and the power clashes of men and women in it are evident. For example, Walter Lee, the main character, seeks power through financial success, but he has no money to start his investment. In order to gain access to the money of his mother, which he wants to use to start a liquor store, he tries to manipulate Lena, Ruth, and Beneatha, the women in the family, by making them feel guilty for not helping him. Lena is the mother of Beneatha and Walter while Ruth is married to Walter and is thus Beneatha's sister in law. The play portrays the traditional role of the housewife, represented by Ruth, in contrast to the emerging role of the literate, educated working female, which Beneatha embodies. Lena represents the old generation of African-American women coming right from slave sharecroppers. Although from a traditional feminist perspective the women in the Younger family might appear to be equally marginal, powerless figures due to patriarchy, a Derridean analysis shows that Ruth, Beneatha, and Lena in fact possess a dynamic, simultaneous degree of power and powerlessness, which causes uneven and shifting power relations among them. This also questions the traditional idea of power as merely a form of oppression and hints to the establishment of a new concept of power.

Feminism is deeply concerned with power. For a great number of feminist theoreticians, gender relations hold a deep connection with power structures in which, due to patriarchal influence, men become the ones in power while women, as second-class human beings, are oppressed and marginalized. This interpretation of power is deeply rooted in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, in which she claims that the woman “is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute –she is the Other” (Beauvoir, 1974: xxii). Similarly, a number of feminists often refer to Michel Foucault's idea of structures and hierarchies when defining power. He claims: “if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others” (Foucault, 1983: 217). From this perspective, feminists have traditionally perceived power as a structure in which some are above and others are below. The ones atop execute their power while the ones below are coerced and yield to the influence of the power upon them. This structure possesses a complexity and dynamism of its own: “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the processes which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; [...] thus forming a chain or system” (Foucault, 1979: 92). Following Foucault's idea, feminists believe that this power organization may be transformed or reversed; hence, one of feminism's pillars is exposing them in all social levels, including literary texts.

For most feminists, power and gender are intrinsically tied. If there is a structure of power in society and gender relations are not even, these feminists conclude that gender difference is indeed related to domination. In other words, one gender assumes the center position and the other is forced to assume the marginal one. By observing patriarchy, feminists conclude that men are the ones in power while women are deemed powerless in this structure. According to Catharine MacKinnon, author of *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, “women/men is a distinction not just of difference, but of power and powerlessness [...]. Power/powerlessness is the sex difference” (MacKinnon, 1987: 123). In this light, feminism traditionally believes that society is structured by means of the binary opposition “men (powerful)/women (powerless),” to which they oppose and thus seek to modify.

Besides the idea of power as a mere male domination over women, other feminist groups view power differently. Instead of thinking of power as domination, these feminists perceive it as an unevenly distributed good, perhaps following a perspective similar to the Marxist notion of unequally distributed resources in society. For them, women are not utterly powerless but they visibly lack this “resource” in

comparison to men. In other words, power is found more in men than it is in women, which emphasizes their notion of power as a social resource unevenly distributed in society. For example, Susan Moller Okin, in her book *Justice, Gender and the Family*, claims that power is unequally distributed between husbands and wives:

when we look seriously at the distribution between husbands and wives of such critical social goods as work (paid and unpaid), power, prestige, self-esteem, opportunities for self-development, and both physical and economic security, we find socially constructed inequalities between them, right down the list (Okin, 1989: 136).

Again, this position differs from the view of power as male domination in the sense that it ascribes a degree of power to women while the construct of power as male domination holds women as powerless beings.

Although both the position of power as male domination and that of power as an unevenly distributed social good are legitimate in general terms, they also imply a simplification of power as an unvarying, perennial oppressive state only changed through revolution or by a fair redistribution. This notion is common in most feminist interpretations of literary texts, for feminist critics tend to emphasize the oppression to which patriarchy subjects women in literary works or how patriarchy causes power to be unequally distributed in society and call for a change. However, these common feminist notions of power can be further analyzed to reveal that these relations of power and gender usually overlook other aspects of power structures. For example, in feminist readings of literary texts, power relations and differences among women as well as the dynamics in these structures are seldom disclosed or they are usually written off as patriarchy by-products. A Derridean perspective of power and its feminist analysis reveals a subtle, but important feature of power structures: power itself does not represent a constant, monolithic structure and traditional views of power need to take such dynamism into consideration.

A DERRIDEAN PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINISM'S VIEWS ON POWER

While at a first glance the feminist positions of power as male domination or as an immaterial resource that is present with less frequency in women seem valid and fair, they actually rest upon the binary opposition of presence versus absence that Derrida calls logocentrism and to which he openly objects:

The system of language associated with phonetic-alphabetic writing is that within which logocentric metaphysics, determining the sense of being as presence, has been produced. This logocentrism, this *epoch* of the full speech, has always

placed in parenthesis, suspended, and suppressed for essential reasons, all free reflection on the origin and status of writing, all science of writing which was not technology and the *history of a technique*, itself leaning upon a mythology and a metaphor of a natural writing. It is this logocentrism which, limiting the internal system of language in general by a bad abstraction, prevents Saussure and the majority of his successors from determining fully and explicitly that which is called “the integral and concrete object of linguistics” (Derrida, 1978: online).

Derrida objects to logocentrism because, in his words, it limits an integral vision of linguistics. His thought, nevertheless, can also be applied to Western thought in general. For Derrida, Western thought is shaped by a series of binary operations that highlight one specific meaning construction while obscuring many other possible readings of a text. In order to uncover these other readings, Derrida proposes inverting the binary operations present within texts:

In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment (Derrida, 1981: 41).

In general terms, feminists have agreed to this idea and have used it to uncover the influence of patriarchy on society.

Feminist thought, however, has created a similar binary opposition of its own. As the ones feminists oppose to, feminist constructs and interpretations of society highlight one meaning while obscuring others; such is the case of the feminist proposition that society is essentially patriarchal. This belief falls into what Derrida calls a “transcendental signified”. A transcendental signified is a concept whose meaning originates directly within itself and does not follow a differential or relational association with any other realities. As a result, this transcendental signified becomes the center of meaning, or “prior truth” which allows structuring other ideas of meaning around it (Bressler, 1999: 124). For Derrida, such “prior truths” are not accurate because they are understood without being formerly compared to other signifieds or signifiers, which for him is impossible as it is perceived when he discusses the idea of representation:

The so-called “thing itself” is always already a representamen shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The representamen functions only by giving rise to an interpretant that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity. The self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move. The property of the representamen is to be itself and another, to be produced as a structure of reference, to be separated from itself. The property of the *representamen* is not to be *proper* [*propre*], that is to say absolutely proximate to itself (*prope*, *proprius*). *The represented* is always already a *representamen* (Derrida, 1978: online).

Specifically, feminism assumes that patriarchy is a monolithic constant, present in all societies, that

enjoys a perennial privileged position. In doing so, feminism claims that women either lack power altogether or always have it in lesser amounts than men do. While at a first glance this assumption appears fairly accurate, it fails to observe different power structures at play within societies, many of them overlapping or even surpassing patriarchal power.

Derrida's thinking, when applied to feminist views of society, causes one to wonder if societies are essentially patriarchal and if all the power struggles in them are issues of men oppressing women and of women struggling to acquire a fairer amount of power. Similarly, the idea of patriarchy as a constant, monolithic power structure is questioned. Do members of marginal groups possess power? Are there any other forces besides patriarchy at play in power struggles related to gender? Is power merely a form of oppression from men to women? As an example, an analysis of the women in Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* and their power structures, in the light of Derrida's thought, provides a useful glimpse of their usually undisclosed complexity and dynamism.

THE WOMEN IN *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

The three women in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* are Ruth, Beneatha, and Lena. Their relationship is summarized in the figure below:

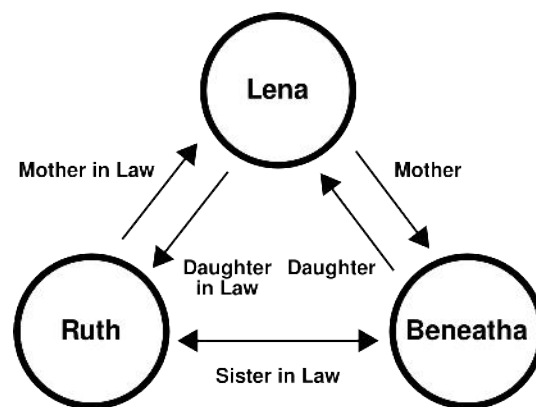


Ilustración 1: *Relationship of the Younger Women*

Besides kinship, Ruth, Beneatha and Lena share their humble background, precarious living conditions, and their belonging to a minority: the three women are African-Americans. Still, in terms of age, each one is separated for at least one decade.

Hansberry describes Ruth as follows:

Ruth is about thirty. We can see that she was a pretty girl, even exceptionally so, but now it is apparent that life has been little that she expected, and disappointment has already begun to hang in her face. In a few years, before thirty-five even, she will be known among her people as a “settled woman” (1988: 24).

From this description, it is evident that Ruth has suffered the oppressive force of patriarchal impositions in her life. Since Ruth is married to Walter Lee, Lena's son, she has taken the role of a housewife. She also takes care of Travis, her 10 year old son. To support the family, Ruth works in the kitchen of a different family, which she has done for three years already (Hansberry, 1988: 37).

Hansberry's description of Beneatha contrasts sharply with Ruth's: “She is about twenty, as slim and intense as her brother. She is not as pretty as her sister in law, but her lean, almost intellectual face has a handsomeness of its own” (1988: 35). Beneatha is the only woman –and member– in the family with a higher education level: she is attending college because her goal is to become a doctor. Beneatha's higher education level also shows in the way she talks:

Her speech is a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family's insofar as education has permeated her sense of English –and perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally –at last– won out in her inflection; but not altogether, because over all of it is a soft slurring and transformed use of vowels which is the decided influence of the Southside (Hansberry, 1988: 35).

Beneatha's different speech sets her apart from the other women, who often have problems to understand both Beneatha's elaborated words and intellectual concepts, as when Ruth cannot understand or even pronounce the word “assimilationist” that Beneatha has just used (Hansberry 1988: 81).

Finally, Lena, mother of Beneatha and Ruth's mother in law is an uneducated, conservative woman of a totally different generation. Hansberry's description of Lena shows her physical and inner strength:

She is a woman in her early sixties, full-bodied and strong. She is one of those women of a certain grace and beauty who wear it so unobtrusively that it takes a while to notice. Her dark-brown face is surrounded by the total whiteness of her hair, and, being a woman who has adjusted to many things in life and overcame many more, her face is full of strength (1988: 39).

Because of the generation gap separating Lena from the other women, she is sometimes unable to understand the way the younger women speak:

Beneatha: Brother is a flip –let's face it.

Mama: (*To Ruth, helplessly*) What's a flip?

Ruth: (*Glad to add kindling*) She's saying he's crazy.

Beneatha: Not crazy. Brother isn't really crazy yet –he –he's an elaborate neurotic (Hansberry, 1988: 49).

Lena is the woman who has the lowest education level in the family. Indeed, she is the closest to the slavery period in US history: “Son –I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers” (Hansberry 1988: 143). Still, she is proud of her roots: “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. [. . .] We ain't never been that –dead inside” (Hansberry 1988: 143). Lena's words reveal her inner strength and pride.

As it can be seen, the women in the Younger family share their unprivileged social class, belong to a minority group (they are African-American), and by definition are oppressed by patriarchy. Again, from a traditional perspective of binary oppositions, if they are oppressed, they belong to the margin and thus are either powerless or share a very limited quota of power. Still, a Derridean analysis of their relationship reveals that they possess a power structure which is not equal for each of them and that challenges the idea of gender as the factor defining power or powerlessness.

POWER STRUCTURES OF THE YOUNGER WOMEN

In terms of power, one could expect Beneatha, the educated, liberated woman, to be above the other two women because they are still blinded by the patriarchal system. Lena and Ruth would therefore share the same level of power. Another position could maintain that due to age and experience, Lena would be above the two young women, which is true to some extent since Lena indeed is the one in charge of the decision making in the Younger family. This would place both Beneatha and Ruth at the same level below Lena. These two possible power structures are summarized in the figure below:

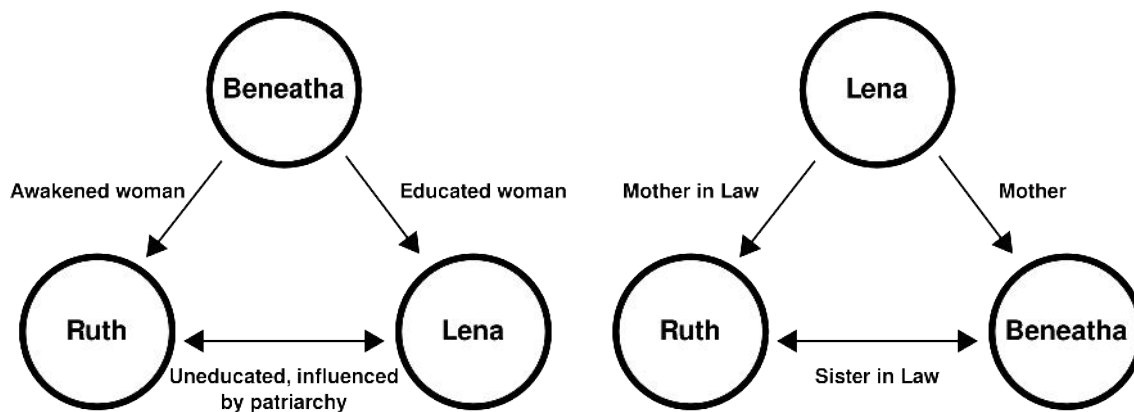


Ilustración 2: *Two Possible Power Relationships of the Younger Women*

One more possible power structure would place Beneatha on top while Lena would follow her in the hierarchy because of her age and experience and Ruth would be the last one. Still, another possible power structure would place Lena on top, followed by Beneatha and with Ruth in the lowest position. These traditional power structures based on binary oppositions are reflected in the figure below:

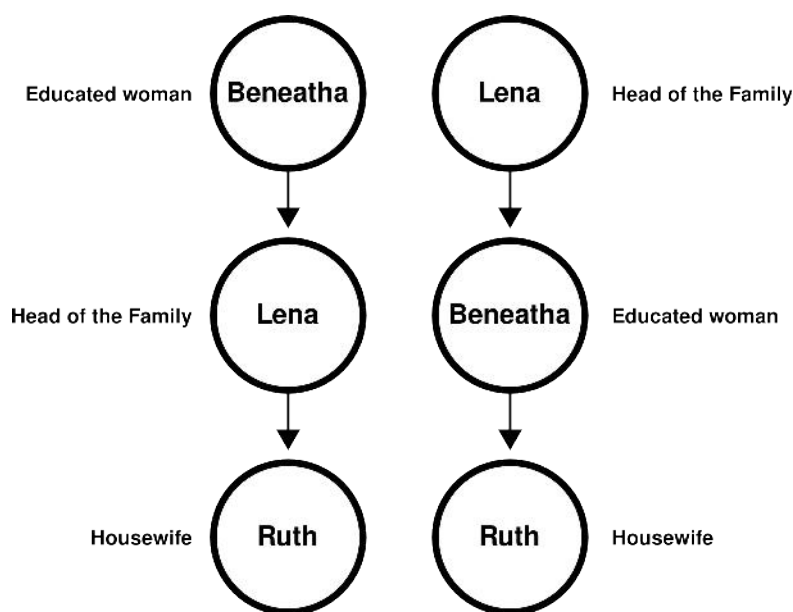


Ilustración 3: *Two Other Possible Power Relationships of the Younger Women*

However, the power structure in the Younger women becomes far more complex once that a Derridean analysis questions the simplicity of these traditional views of power and gender.

RUTH YOUNGER: THE POWERLESS HOUSEWIFE?

MacKinnon has called female power “a contradiction in terms, socially speaking” (1987: 53). If her assertion is true, no woman has power of any form. However, her idea comes into question when one analyzes the power relations of Ruth with the other women in *A Raisin in the Sun*. At a first glance, Ruth appears to be the woman with the least power –or the woman who utterly lacks power in any form– if compared to Beneatha and Lena. While Beneatha is a liberated woman and Lena is the head of the Younger family, Ruth has totally assimilated the discourse of patriarchy. For Ruth, a woman's happiness comes from marrying a rich man. This is evident when Beneatha's hesitation about a possible marriage with George Murchison surprises her: “You mean you wouldn't marry George Murchison if the asked you someday? That pretty, rich thing? Honey, I knew you was odd–” (Hansberry, 1988: 49). Ruth's level of literacy is basic, which can be explained as a product of patriarchal discourse on her: she does not think it necessary for a woman to pursue educational goals if all she needs to do is finding a man who will take care of her. Ruth appears, thus, a totally helpless victim of patriarchal oppression, especially taking into account Patricia Hill's idea of “interlocking systems of oppression”. She explains this idea as follows:

The notion of interlocking oppressions refers to the macro-level connections linking systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender. This is the model describing the social structures that create social positions. [...] Second, the notion of intersectionality describes micro-level processes –namely, how each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression described by the metaphor of intersectionality. Together they shape oppression (Hill, 2002: 82).

Due to the apparently unprivileged position Ruth has as a result of these interlocking systems of oppression and their strong influence on her, Ruth even lacks the vision to realize her victimization. In this light, one could expect Ruth to feel inferior to Beneatha or to admire her because of the latter's high literacy level. Also, one could expect Ruth to accept Beneatha's authority over her since Beneatha is in college and is more knowledgeable. Similarly, Ruth might be expected to follow Lena's every word without questioning it, due to Lena's experience in life. However, this does not happen because Ruth actually feels entitled to criticize Beneatha, sees her as inferior, and is even powerful enough to confront Lena directly.

Although Ruth may be expected to somehow acknowledge Beneatha's power over her, in reality she feels superior to her sister in law. Ruth demonstrates her power over Beneatha by using language as a domination tool: Ruth freely criticizes Beneatha and uses belittling words when referring to her sister in law. Ruth criticizes Beneatha in front of Lena: “You ask me, this child ain't sweet on nobody but herself –

(*Underbreath*) Express herself!” (Hansberry, 1988: 48). Ruth is clearly mocking Beneatha's efforts for self-expression as an individual. For Ruth, Beneatha is simply wasting her time and depicts her as utterly self-centered. Clearly, Ruth's discourse may be attributed to patriarchy –Ruth has assimilated patriarchal premises and has become the voice of this oppressive system to keep Beneatha under control since the young woman represents a threat to Ruth's stability. Still, Ruth would have no reason to feel intimidated by Beneatha because no man is present in the house at the moment and Walter, the man in the family, is not viewed as a figure of power. In this light, one may trace Ruth's attacks as a way to legitimize her own power in front of Lena, Beneatha's mother. However, this is not the case, for Ruth makes remarks about Beneatha's behavior even when the two women are alone: “Bennie, why you always gotta be pickin' on your brother? Can't you be a little sweeter sometimes?” (Hansberry, 1988: 38).

Although Ruth is not an educated woman, she does not feel belittled by the intellectual level of Beneatha. In fact, Ruth does not treat her sister in law as a woman, for she usually refers to Beneatha as a “little girl” (Hansberry, 1988: 49). One could ascribe this particular use of language to Ruth's closeness with Beneatha, but the reality is that Beneatha is not a fully grown woman in Ruth's eyes: “You think you a woman, Bennie –but you still a little girl. What you did was childish– so you got treated like a child” (Hansberry, 1988: 52).

Ruth's position of power above Beneatha is more evident when one analyzes what happens when Beneatha tries to inquire about Ruth's pregnancy. Ruth disdains Beneatha's insistence and plainly refuses to give her any information: “Mind your own business” (Hansberry, 1988: 58). By saying these words, Ruth reaffirms her position of power over her sister in law and excludes her from the circle of those with access to her private information. Although Ruth's refusal to provide information to Beneatha may seem a simple matter of embarrassment, its connection with power is disclosed in the light of Frye's link between power and information. Frye states that “the powerful normally determine what is said and sayable” (1983: 105). From this perspective, by denying information to Beneatha, Ruth is executing her power over her and placing her sister in law in the margin. This emphasizes the idea that Ruth is not below Beneatha in terms of power.

If Ruth is not below Beneatha and appears to be above her, her power relation with Lena becomes an important issue for analysis as well. Traditional, binary-opposition based perspectives would conclude that Ruth necessarily aligns below Lena. Since Lena is older than Ruth, Ruth's age-related power becomes ineffective. Similarly, if age means experience, Lena is much more experienced than Ruth is and makes the decisions in the family. Ruth, however, is empowered enough to defy Lena. This is evident when Ruth

does not take Lena's criticism about the way Ruth takes care of Travis, Ruth's son:

Mama: [. . .] What you fix for his breakfast this morning?

Ruth: (*Angrily*) I feed my son, Lena!

Mama: I ain't meddling –(*Underbreath, busy-bodyish*) I just noticed all last week he had cold cereal.

[. . .]

Ruth: (*Furious*) I gave him hot oats –is that all right! (Hansberry, 1988: 40-41).

Although Lena makes the decisions in the Younger family and Ruth respects her authority, the fact that Ruth confronts Lena's criticism openly reveals a more leveled power relationship between the two women. Ruth is not afraid to defend herself and does not take Lena's criticism sheepishly, which causes Lena to shift the conversation subject and partner. This reveals a shift in the power structure placing Ruth above Lena herself. Ruth is not a powerless housewife, but an empowered woman that is able to confront even the head of the family.

Ruth's powerlessness becomes destabilized from a Derridean perspective of her behavior. While binary opposites portray Ruth as the lowest in the power hierarchy of the Younger women, the way Ruth relates to Beneatha and to Lena challenges this position. Ruth sometimes appears to be in the same level of Beneatha and Lena. In other occasions, Ruth appears to be even above Beneatha or Lena. This highlights the idea that power is not a fixed, hierarchical structure of the women in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

BENEATHA YOUNGER: THE EMPOWERED WOMAN?

On a surface level, Beneatha Younger appears to be the most liberated and empowered woman in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Again, this is based on a traditional analysis of binary opposites reinforced by the constructs of presence and absence to which Derrida objects. For example, the existence –or presence– of education in Beneatha as a person becomes meaningful because education is absent in the rest of the Youngers. Similarly, Beneatha wants to become an individual of her own while the other women in the family apparently live according to patriarchal premises. This places Beneatha in the position of an awakened woman and suggests that she could be above the rest of the family in terms of power: she has a voice of her own. On a deeper level, however, Beneatha does not seem an empowered woman: she resorts to oppressive discourse to gain access and becomes the powerless one in the family.

For Marilyn Frye, power and access to resources are deeply intertwined: “total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and

manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access” (1983, 103). In the case of Beneatha, she lacks access to a number of “privileges” in the Younger family. The most evident is access to information. Ruth, for example, refuses to give Beneatha details about her pregnancy because it is not Beneatha's business, but the young woman defends her right to know (Hansberry, 1988: 58). Even though Beneatha is apparently empowered by possessing knowledge, in reality she lacks a voice of her own in the family, which she perceives and deeply resents: “Why, why can't I say what I want to around here, like everybody else?” (Hansberry 1988: 51).

Since Beneatha lacks access and her own voice in the family, she turns to oppressive discourse to make up for this lack. She struggles for power by using language as a tool to emphasize her superiority and thus to become empowered. This struggle for power through language becomes evident when she belittles Ruth: “You wouldn't even begin to understand. Anybody who married Walter could not possibly understand” (Hansberry, 1988: 49). The words Beneatha uses to undermine Ruth reveal her clear intent of placing herself in a superior intellectual level, which resembles more the discourse of patriarchy to legitimize power than that of a liberated, empowered woman. Beneatha applies this oppressive discourse on Lena as well:

Beneatha: I don't flit! I –I experiment with different forms of expression.

[. . .]

Beneatha: –People have to express themselves one way or another.

Mama: What is it you want to express?

Beneatha: (*Angrily*) Me! [. . .] Don't worry –I don't expect you to understand (Hansberry, 1988: 48).

Again, if Beneatha is indeed a liberated woman, why does she undermine other women? Her struggle for power by means of language becomes a possible explanation.

Beneatha's need to gain access –and power– is more evident when she defies Lena's religious authority:

Mama: (*Kindly*) 'Course you going to be a doctor, honey, God willing.

Beneatha: (*Drily*) God hasn't got a thing to do with it.

Mama: Beneatha –that just wasn't necessary.

Beneatha: Well –neither is God. I get sick of hearing about God.

Mama: Beneatha! (Hansberry, 1988: 50).

Beneatha's remark about God is, as Lena points it out, unnecessary at that point. However, Beneatha keeps pushing her lack of religious faith on Lena until the latter cannot stand it any longer. This is clearly an act of subversion on Beneatha's part, for the young woman even calls her mother a tyrant: "I see (quietly). I also see that everybody thinks it's all right for Mama to be a tyrant. But all the tyranny in the world will never put a God in the heavens!" (Hansberry, 1988: 52). Again, subversion would be irrelevant for Beneatha if she possessed power, but her rebellion against her mother's faith shows that the young woman lacks agency and thus, power. This questions the idea rooted in binary oppositions of presence and absence that Beneatha is situated in a higher power hierarchy than the other women.

LENA YOUNGER: THE STRONG HEAD OF THE FAMILY?

For Carole Pateman, women are below men in terms of power and this hierarchy becomes the standard in today's society: "in modern civil society all men are deemed good enough to be women's masters" (1988: 219). This is not, however, the case for Lena Younger. Lena is the maximum authority in the Younger family and no other member –male or female– questions her power. Even Walter Lee, the man in the family, acknowledges her unquestionable authority: "What you need me to say you done right for? *You* the head of this family. You run our lives like you want to" (Hansberry, 1988: 94-95).

Although immersed in a patriarchal model and not even knowing about it, Lena has achieved power in the family because of the historical development of her ethnic group. Lena is an African-American, and this group's struggle for freedom from racial oppression has overlapped with that of freedom from gender oppression:

It does not matter that sexism assigned them this role [homemaking]. It is more important that they took this conventional role and expanded it to include caring for one another, for children, for black men, in ways that elevated our spirits, that kept us from despair, that taught some of us to be revolutionaries able to struggle for freedom (Hooks, 1990: 44).

In this light, the traditional role of homemaking that patriarchy used to enslave white women became a source of power for black women. Hooks puts it this way: "Historically, black women have resisted white supremacy domination by working to establish homeplace" (Hooks, 1990: 44). From this perspective, more than a helplessly enslaved woman, Lena becomes an active promoter of resistance to racial oppression in her family. This is evident when Lena confronts her son Walter and asks him to decide what to teach to his son:

Mama: (*opening her eyes and looking into Walter's*) No. Travis, you stay right here. And you make him understand what you doing, Walter Lee. You teach him good. Like Willy Harris taught you. You show where our five generations done come to. (*Walter looks from her to the boy, who grins at him innocently*) Go ahead, son –(*she folds her hands and closes her eyes*) Go ahead (Hansberry, 1988: 147).

Far from just being subjected to patriarchy, Lena actually becomes an agent and a force liberating her family from racial oppression. However, Lena also becomes an oppressor herself, for she exerts her power fiercely upon Beneatha:

Mama: Now –You say after me, in my mother's house there is still God. (*There is a long pause and Beneatha stares at the floor wordlessly. Mama repeats the phrase with precision and cool emotion*) In my mother's house there is still God.

Beneatha: In my mother's house there is still God.

(*A long pause.*)

Mama: (*Walking away from Beneatha, too disturbed for triumphant posture. Stopping and turning back to her daughter*)

There are some ideas we ain't going to have in this house. Not long as I am the head of this family (Hansberry, 1988: 51).

Since Lena even resorts to physical violence to keep her power over her children (she slaps Beneatha and beats up Walter), she could be thought of as a hegemonic and also strongest power figure in the family, but this is not the case, for Lena indeed feels in a lower position than that of her children: “They frightens me, Ruth. My children. [. . .] And the other [Beneatha] done commence to talk about things I can't seem to understand in no form or fashion” (Hansberry, 1988: 52). Her fears and insecurity, far from placing her a strong leader in the family, highlight her vulnerability and lack of strength. From this perspective, Lena's powerful position and unquestionable authority become destabilized, which suggests that the traditional notion of power as domination of someone else is neither constant nor monolithic.

TRANSFORMATIVE POWER: A REDEFINITION OF POWER

Traditional definitions of power based on notions of binary opposites fail to fully assess the dynamism and complexity of power because they reduce power relations to oversimplified constructs. An analysis of such relations among the women of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* exemplifies the inaccuracy of traditionally understood power hierarchies, for it discloses easily overlooked power shifts and overlaps, and reveals the simultaneous presence and absence of power in the female characters in their power relations. In this light, a new definition of power becomes necessary, which echoes the claims of some feminist groups who state that current definitions of power are to be revised. For example, Sarah Lucia Hoagland defines power as “the power of ability, of choice and engagement. It is creative; and hence it is an affecting and transforming power but not a controlling power” (1988:118). This kind of power is

perceived in Lena when Beneatha tells her why she does not like George Murchison, the rich boy:

Beneatha: Mama, George is a fool –honest. (*She rises*)

[...]

Mama: You sure?

Beneatha: Yes.

Mama: Well –I guess you better not waste your time with no fools (Hansberry, 1988: 98).

Lena possesses the power to engage with her daughter's feelings and, instead of imposing on Beneatha a patriarchal vision of comfort and happiness, Lena empowers Beneatha with the freedom to choose for herself. Beneatha shows a similar kind of power afterwards. Even though she has called her mother a tyrant, Beneatha possesses the power to grow and to thank her mother for her understanding:

Beneatha: Mama–

Mama: Yes, baby–

Beneatha: Thank you.

Mama: For what?

Beneatha: For understanding me this time. (Hansberry, 1988: 98).

Beneatha's power is what Starhawk defines as “the power that emerges from within, that is inherent in us as the power to grow is inherent in the seed” (1987: 8). Ruth also displays a similar kind of power when Lena's resolution falters: “You just got strong-willed children and it takes a strong woman like you to keep 'em in hand” (Hansberry, 1988: 52). Ruth's words are especially important, for they show her understanding of Lena's transformative power. For Ruth, Lena is not a tyrant but a woman who possesses a power to transform her children in Hoagland's sense.

In conclusion, the women in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* exemplify how traditional, presence-absence constructs reduce the dynamic and shifting nature of power relations to simple monolithic hierarchies that cannot fully explain the intricacies of power in society. Similarly, this suggests the necessity of redefining power in a more open manner. The idea of power as an inner ability for transformation becomes a step in this direction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beauvoir, S. de (1974). *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bressler, Ch. E. (1999). *Literary Criticism*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Derrida, J. (1978). *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. February 3, 2012.
<<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/derrida.htm>>
- (1981). *Positions* (Trans. Alan Bass). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1: An Introduction (Trans. Robert Hurley). New York: Vintage.
- (1983). Afterword: The Subject and Power. In H. Dreyfus & P. Ravinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (pp. 229-264). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Frye, M. (1983). *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Freedom, California: The Crossing Press.
- Hansberry L. (1988). *A Raisin in the Sun*. New York: Signet.
- Hill Collins, P., et al. (2002). Symposium on West and Fenstermaker's "Doing Difference". *Doing Gender, Doing Difference* (pp. 81-84). In S. Fenstermaker & C. West (Eds.). New York: Routledge.
- Hoagland, S. L. (1988). *Lesbian Ethics: Toward a New Value*. Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies.
- Hooks, B. (1990). *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston: South end Press.
- MacKinnon, C. (1987). *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Okin, S. M. (1989). *Justice, Gender and the Family*. New York: Basic Books.

Pateman, C. (1988). *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Starhawk (1987). *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery*. San Francisco: Harper.