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Voicing the Agony: An analysis of the Narrative Art of Alice Walker's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

The visual illustration of black speech in literature like black identity has and wants a voice. Black voice needs a "visual voice" in literature. Black voice has subsisted in society but not always in a positive manner. Black voice has been delineated by a number of black authors and all have seen it as part of one's racial identity. Language has become a source of resistance and the visual depiction of black speech in literature accomplishes the black individual to further feel his presence in literature. The contention of this paper is to see how the visual representation/depiction of black voice in literature is necessary in constructing an established black voice, in understanding the story and finally establishing the black identity. The narrative art of Alice Walker's selected short stories which includes the incorporation of blank English has been analyzed to assess whether her black women characters in speaking their own black English have actually shown that they share the same community, history and culture or just speak a slang without any grammar of its own.

Key Words: Black English, Black Identity, Black Voice, Black women, Transcription.

Literature and writing can essentially be used to immortalize one's experiences and also historicize the thoughts and ideas. Not merely transcribing the thoughts, but also the approach and manner in which those thoughts are articulated that the written words become a base of empowerment for the narrator. The very writing or rendering of the nuance of language in a way that generates a voice becomes an indication of struggle. By depicting how a person is speaking is in a manner emphasizing why he/she is speaking. Establishment of Black identity which is a manifestation of the racial struggle has wanted and still wants a visual voice in literature. The black voice through its repeated attempts of reclamation and transcript has finally reached a stage worth listening to. Language has become a source of resistance and the visual depiction of black speech in literature accomplishes the black individual to further feel his presence in literature. The voice of black authors continues to be resurrecting the tongues of their creations (characters) and they still find significance in a language that is healing, liberating and above all invigorating.

Voice has become vital in creating barriers and division between persons as well as a source of power. A voice can become effective only when it is heard. Historically it has been seen that some voices were perpetuated to be superior to others and for ascertaining that some voices were not only heard but also noticed, the silencing of others were required. The African Americans were the silenced minority and so they "had to represent themselves as 'speaking subjects' before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture" (Gates 129). They needed a voice, different from a language that had any relation to the history of slavery,

oppression, and silencing. As such they seized their captor's words and infused the language with voices that were wholly their own. The slaves constructed their own vernacular by incorporating new meaning to the recognized syllables. The words used by both the black and white Americans were English but the voice that surfaced depicted the different realities of the black and white Americans. This voice became "an effectual element of resistance" and also exhibited the conviction that the "perceptions of our language are integrated with our perception of ourselves" (qtd in Ostendorf 23). Language and vocalizations continue to be essential identifiers for the black community and emphasize the notion that the "unity of speech" is indispensable for "unity of a people" (North 17). The need for a manifestly black voice results from its ability to express common experiences and also fortify a sense of community as "words not only describe – they reflect and construct cultural experience" (Morgan 3). Black voice is also celebrated as it does not enslave them. Moreover black voice helps in asserting their self-definition and gives life and soul into their words. Zora Neal Hurston says black voice is "a method of communicating black meanings to black audiences, a kind of community-reinforcing and collective cultural celebration." (Minnick 131).

Black voice has played a vital role in the formation of black identity and just as identity is in a state of flux, voice has also continued to evolve ever since its initiation. Black speech is preserved as it is a way "of saying things beautifully even if they are ugly things" and helps in the conservation of a "distinctive history, worldview, and culture" (Rickford 205). The influence of black voice is manifested in literature, arts, music and the everyday speech. Voice and language are closely related and working together communicates themes in literature. According to Mikhail Bakhtin

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's own only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word...exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (qtd in Gates 1).

Language refers to what we speak and voice is the way it is said. While language includes the vocabulary, principle and rhetorical procedures that confer the structure of speech, voice is shaped by as well as reliant on language. Voice affects the tone and mood as it depicts the speech and creates the persona of a character /text. Language shapes the ideas and as a result shows something but voice speaks or says.

Geneva Smitherman states that "historically black speech has been demanded of those who wish to retain close affinities with the black community" (Smitherman 12) but others employ black speech as it implies a standpoint on life. James Baldwin delineates black speech as a language which came to "existence by means of brutal necessity" (Baldwin). Black voice is also used by an individual to express things that cannot be told otherwise in the language of the oppressor. bell hooks speaks about the distressing condition of this individual :

"we are wedded in language, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination - a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you?...The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. (qtd in Harding 153).

The individual is thus empowered to be the maker of his/her self. The Blacks want to differentiate themselves by the presentation of their own voice. They create words to ornament and beautify the

black voice and as such black voice is continuously evolving. Moreover this also highlights uniqueness and inventiveness as other relevant characteristics of black speech.

Though black voice is often regarded as different from “standard” speech, writers like Baldwin, Hurston and Gates reveal how some aspects of black voice unite with an “Africanized form of English that reflects...[a] cultural heritage” (Smitherman 2). Black identity has a voice and so this voice must have its presence in literature. Black voices to be surfaced and also be heard, its existence as well as legitimization were essential. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. said that legitimacy depended on the transcription of voice, because “black people [became] speaking subjects only by inscribing their voices in the written word” (Gates 130) and it is essential that “the written representation of this voice is a rewriting of the speaking voice” (Gates 131).

An effectual visual transcription of black speech is essential in assigning a black voice in literature. It often is easy to envision characters’ identity based on descriptions provided in the narrative but if asked to think about the sound of the speech of a black character, it may not be easy. In the absence of the author’s identity and any depiction that helps in establishing a character’s voice, revealing of a black voice is generally helped by a visual medium.

In literature, the formation of the black voice is mostly dependent on visual presentation like the spellings, appearance and arrangement of the text. Black writers, who, use black English in their narratives do this by “representing the sound of language through spelling, suggesting and emphasizing a word’s pronunciation through its visualization”(Pettis 295). These features create a visual as well as acoustic depiction of a character’s identity. By maneuvering the arrangement of the words, letters, using apostrophes to indicate the missing of letters in a word, adding or subtracting some vowels and consonants, using double negatives in the constructions and zero copula (auxiliary verb) the author actually forces the reader to read, utter as well as listen to the sound of the word differently from which he/she is accustomed to hearing or seeing. This effort alters the very aspect of reading literature; interpretation of the text shifts from the contextual and is reliant upon both the visual and auditory understanding. Black speech is reliant on sound, and these “meaningful sounds move people”(Smitherman142).

The strength of black voices was silenced when black characters’ speech was presented in visually culpable ways. For long the black body was defenseless and discarded but the voice offered a more feasible help for the people of the black community. Realizing that black people wanted to “speak for themselves...in order to assert and maintain their rank as men among men” (Gates 173), white authors recreated the black voice. Unable to cover and hide the black body the white authors tried to control the establishment of black identity in respect of language. The black bodies at times occupied physical space in their writings but their voices were trodden. Whenever the authors gave the character voice, and also transcribed the voice it was done in a disgustingly inaccurate manner. bell hooks described that the intention of the oppressive voice was to eliminate the language of the oppressed:

“No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself...Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk” (qtd in Harding 158).

The oppressor produced the thoughts of the subordinate by endowing them with speech. This deprived the black of independent and self-governing thought and made him an object (North 11). The white authors through their texts also tried to highlight the inferiority of the blacks. Black voices were shown as ruining and damaging the standard English. The black characters, with their speech were shown as estranged from the whites, and strange and unintelligible creatures. Divesting the black people of something which they “love so much – the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them”, the white authors actually took away their voices; the blacks lost their voices and this was “the worst of all possible things that could happen” (qtd in Rickford 5) to the blacks. But the blacks were not silent for long; they wrote to “counter the racist endeavor to write down the Negro as something less than a man” (Gates 173), and finally regained the right to their voice.

The belief that “language is also a place of struggle” also delineates the reclamation of the black voice by the blacks. The black speech in due course thrived in black narratives. But many black authors in the beginning mastered standard English in order to avoid the disgrace related with black English and to be accepted as serious authors. At the same time there was a fear of being annihilated or silenced by the voice of the majority. So the black authors struggled for the visual and acoustic presence of black English in their texts. Black voice has become a necessity in literature so as to understand black identity, culture and heritage. T.S.Eliot is of the opinion that “For the transmission of culture...a peculiar way of thinking, feeling and behaving...and for its maintenance, there is no safeguard more reliable than language” (qtd in Rickford 225).

The blending of a visual voice in the text/literature helps the author to ascertain a bond directly with the reader. This bond is not only established in literary dialogue but can be articulated in the narrative style. The Rickfords in *The Spoken Soul* occasionally include colloquialisms and thus include black English. The eye-dialect can potentially convey the reader an indication of the author's identity, or voice in texts where there is neither character nor dialogue to represent the black body.

The portrayal of a visual black voice in texts symbolized a visual retaliation for black writers/authors. Transliterating or transcribing black dialogue indicated more than merely expressing something in a dissimilar voice. The black bodies which were once physically and brutally silenced or wrongly indicted of destroying words were now determined to reproduce black voices. Their concern was with the visual representation even if the words along with the pronunciation remained the same. The black voice can never be precisely embodied if it is not portrayed accurately as the character speaks and also how the author/writer intends. Michael North mentions that language is “something that one must remain loyal to” (North 14). As language is based on the perception of the self, it is quite likely that individuals will like to unite their grammar of expression with their grammar of life and also speak in a language that tells about themselves. Therefore it is not unusual for people to communicate in the same voice that defines who they are and also write how they speak, particularly when they are transcribing their speech. Moreover as stated by North it seems to be a perfidy if a person's voice emerges to be disloyal to their own language. One's speech thus becomes a definitive sign of one's identity and particularly so for racial communities.

Authors like Zora Neal Hurston, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker helped in the “recollections of broken tongues” (qtd in Harding 157) and restored back pride to the black community and reinforced a multifaceted black voice. In her conversation with Sharon Wilson, Walker said:

“I’m always trying to give voice to specific people in the hope that if I do that, then that specific kind of person will be better understood, really brought into the common fund of people that we have knowledge of and therefore we share with, and are in community with” (320).

Alice Walker employs particular linguistic features related with the systematic rules of the African American vernacular and thus imparts orality into the written works. By employing some grammatical rules and oral traditions specific to the African American vernacular, Walker retorts to conventional standards. As such they eventually accentuate the dialect's authenticity and reiterate the African American cultural and racial identity.

Some features of African American English/Black English, as amplified by Rickford are given in the table along with examples and the meanings in standard English.

Features of African American English

Features	Examples of Words, as used in Black English	Standard English Usage
Reduction of word-final consonant clusters, speacially in a sequence of two or more consonants	han', des'	hand, desk
Deletion of word-final single consonant, especially after a vowel	ma', ca'	man, cat
Realization of final <i>ng</i> as <i>n</i> in gerunds	walkin'	walking
Deletion of <i>l</i> after a vowel	he'p	help
Deleting of <i>ll</i> of contracted will	He be here tomorrow	He'll be here tomorrow
Deletion or vocalization of <i>r</i> after a vowel	Sistuh, fough	Sister, four
`Deletion of unstressed initial and medial syllables	'fraid, sec't'ry	Afraid secretary
Realization of <i>ing</i> as <i>ang</i> and <i>ink</i> as <i>ank</i>	thang, sang, drank	thing, sing, drink
Absence of copula/auxiliary <i>is</i> and <i>are</i> for present tense states and actions	He Ø tall, They Ø running	He is tall They are running
Use of invariant <i>be</i> for habitual aspect	He be walkin'	He usually walks
Use of invariant <i>be</i> for future <i>will be</i>	He be here tomorrow	He will be here tomorrow
Use of unstressed <i>been</i> or <i>bin</i> for <i>has/have been</i>	He been sick	He has been sick
Use of stressed BIN to mark remote phase	She BIN married	She has been married for a long time
Use of <i>done</i> to emphasize the completed nature of action	He done did it	He's already done it
Absence of third person singular present tense- <i>s</i>	He walk	He walks
Use of <i>don't</i> instead of <i>doesn't</i>	He don't sing	He doesn't sing
Use of <i>have</i> instead of <i>has</i>	She have it	She has it
Generalization of <i>is, was, are, there</i>	They is some crazy folk	They are some crazy

with plural single person subjects	We was there	folk We were there
Use of past tense form as past participle	He had bit She has ran	He had bitten She has run
Absence of possessive –s	John house	John's house
Absence of plural –s	Two boy	Two boys
Use of <i>and</i> (th)em or <i>nem</i> , usually after a proper name, to mark associative plurals	Felicia an' (th)em	Felicia and her friends
Appositive or pleonastic pronouns	The teacher, she yell at the kids	That teacher yells at the kids
Use of <i>y'all</i> and <i>they</i> to mark second person plural and third plural possessive respectively	It's y'all ball It's they house	It's your ball It's their house
Absence of relative pronoun (who, which, what or that)	That's the man Θ come here	That's the man who came here
Use of ain' (t) as a general preverbal negator for <i>am not</i> , <i>isn't</i> , <i>aren't</i> , <i>hasn't</i> , <i>haven't</i> , <i>didn't</i>	He ain' here	He isn't here
Multiple negation or negative concord (that is, negating the auxiliary verb and all indefinite pronouns in the sentence)	He don' do nothin'	He doesn't do anything
Negative inversion (inversion of the auxiliary and indefinite pronoun)	Can't nobody say nothing	Nobody can't say anything
Formation of direct question without inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb	Why I can't play? They didn't take it?	Why can't I play? Didn't they take it?

Source: Rickford, John Russell. *African American Vernacular English*, P. 3-14

The features- grammatical, lexical and phonological have been employed by Walker to visualize the voice of her characters as well as their black identity.

Mrs. Jerome, the protagonist of "Her Sweet Jerome" is described as a big, awkward woman. She works as a hair dresser and is married to a man ten years younger than her. She had no "eddicashion" (27) and would say to her customers "I just don't know how some womens can stand it, honey" (28). She clearly said "One thing my husband does not do" is "he don't beat me!" (28). The customers replied, "You say he don't? Hummmmm, well, hush your mouf" (28). She was out of her mind from the moment she heard whispers "Your old man's puttin' something *over* on you, sweets" (29). She searched the whole town for his "woman" and asked whomever she met, "You been messin' with my Jerome?" (29) She asked all the women in her beauty shos "You the one ain't you?" (30) Finally the truth was disclosed. She realized that Jerome does not have any lover, "It ain't no woman" (33) but he was passionately involved in the Black Revolution.

The protagonist of the story, "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff", Hannah Kemhuff was the victim of heartless discrimination. She told to Tante Rosie, a root worker, and her assistant, the story's narrator, "I were not quite twenty years... we were on the point of starvation. We was so hungry, and the children were getting so weak..." (57-58). She had always been proud and

reminisced her past, "We never had to ask nobody for nothing"(58). As the hard times affected all in Cherokee Country, the government provided food to all who were starving and so they had to go "to a place they had and get so much and so much fat back, so much and so much of corn meal and so much and so much of ... red beans. As I say, we was, by then desperate..."(58). Hannah Kemhuff said of her sister, Carrie Mae, who helped her with clothes "she were at that time living in the North. In Chicago. And she were working for some good white people that give her they old clothes to send back down here. And I tell you they were good things. And I was glad to get them. So, as it was gitting to be real cold, I dressed myself and my husband and the children up in them clothes. For see, they was made up North to be worn up there where there's snow at and they were warm as toast"(58). She went on to say "Now, so I dresses us all up in our new finery... we goes... government said was due us as proud as ever we know how to be..."(59). When she was standing in the food handout line "hoping that the white folks what give out the food wouldn't notice that I was dressed nice and that if they did they would see how hungry the babies was and how pitiful we all was"(60). When she was refused food by Sarah Marie Sadler, she said "'my children is hungry'". It was in the food handout line that her husband deserted her and she said "And that was about the last I seen of him" (61). She described the condition of her children as "They was sweet children and not much trouble, although they was about to go out of their minds with hunger" (61). Soon her children died, she became a prostitute and began to drink. This ruined her life and so she focused all her energies in taking revenge on Sarah Marie Sadler.

Rannie Toomer, the central character in the short story "Strong Horse Tea", is described as an unattractive, unmarried mother of a son whom she calls Snooks. When Snooks becomes ill, she desperately wants the treatment of a real doctor and avoids the superstitious practices of a root worker. She said "we going to have a us a doctor"(80) and fiercely added "I don't believe in none of that swamp magic..."(81). Rannie Toomer was completely against the folk remedies and said to Sarah "We don't need none of your witch's remedies... we going to get some of them shots that makes people well, cures'em of all they evils, cleans'em out and makes'em strong all at the same time"(81-82). She consoled herself as well as her baby saying "Doctor'll be here soon, baby... I done sent the mailman"(82). She was so hopeful of the doctor's arrival that she said "He coming all right"(84) but Sarah knew "he ain't"(85). Feeling that she has no recourse at her disposal, Rannie finally calls Sarah. At this Sarah said, "He done fetched the doctor" and added "what you reckon brung me over here in this here flood? Wasn't no desire to see no rainbows, I can tell you"(85). Sarah, offered to help her and prescribed the baby strong horse tea, that is, horse's urine. She said to Rannie Toomer "It ain't him that's got to have the strong stomach" rather "You the one got to have a strong stomach... he won't know what it is he's drinking"(86) but "if you wants him out of that bed you better make tracks to git some"(87).

The short story "Elethia" deals with the complexity of slavery, also how the experience of slavery is exploited. The protagonist of the story, by the same name works in a restaurant called "Old Uncle Albert's" where black people could not eat though they worked in the kitchen of that restaurant. Until it was discovered by Elethia herself that the dummy of Uncle Albert in the window of the restaurant was actually "stuffed. Like a bird, like a moose's head, like a giant bass. He was stuffed"(155). One night Elethia, along with her friends broke into the restaurant at night and burnt Uncle Albert to ashes. The extract from the story about who and what Uncle Albert was brings out the racial experience:

Well, the old folks said, he wasn't nobody's uncle and wouldn't sit still for nobody to call him that, either.

Why, said another old –timer, I recalls the time they hung a boy's privates on a post at the end of the street where all the black folks shopped, just to scare us all, you understand, and Albert Porter was the one took 'em down and burried 'em. Us never did find the rest of the boy though. It was just like always- they would throw you in the river with a big old green log tied to you, and down to the bottom you sunk.

He continued:

Albert was born in slavery and he remembered that his mama and daddy didn't know nothing about slavery'd done ended for hear 'bout ten years, the boss man kept them so ignorant of them law, you understand. So he was a mad so-an'-so when he found out. They used to beat him severe trying to make him forget the past and grin and act like a nigger (whenever you saw somebody acting like a nigger, Albert said, you could be sure he seriously dismembered his past.) But he never would. Never would work in the big house as head servant, neither-always broke up stuff. The master at that time was always going around pinching him too. Looks like he hated Albert more than anything-but he never would let him get a job anywhere else. And Albert never would leave home. Too stubborn.

Stubborn, yes. My land, another one said. That's why it do seem strange to see that dummy that sposed to be ole Albert with his mouth open. All them teeth. Hell, all Albert's teeth was knocked out before he was grown. (156-157).

Walker integrates negative constructions and double negatives in her works, which is a characteristic feature of African American vernacular. Using double negatives and negative constructions, particularly "ain't," were the most common features present in characters' discourse, which indicate that the speakers regularly stick to the conventions and are themselves part of a community, and also share the same history. Another grammatical feature related with the African American vernacular is the lack of the possessives in the constructions. The involvedness about the zero copula and double negative rules also accentuates that the dialect/vernacular is a legitimate system of speaking/writing rather than being simply slang. By regularly incorporating double negatives, negative constructions and zero copulas, the vernacular/ black English/African American English is in a way legitimized by Walker.

The grammatical features incorporated in the narratives play a significant role in enhancing the works' overall meaning. These aspects divulge community attachment and as such enhance and reiterate an African American cultural and racial identity. By alternating between standard English and the black English/vernacular in the stories, Walker executes code switching and reacts to mainstream standards. She, by using both the standard English and black English actually emphasizes on the authenticity of the black English/vernacular as an authenticate language system. The grammatical aspects play an important role in indicating the occurrence of code switching in the stories.

Moreover, visually representing conversations/dialogue helps the reader to easily observe the shift between two different voices in the text. Even if the reader is not aware of the nuances of "characteristically" black or white speech/language, the very difference in the appearance of the words indicates the presence of another voice in the text. The visual difference in speech/language between the narration of a text by the author/narrator and its conversations/dialogue helps the reader to perceive the character's identity.

Walker employs grammatical aspects to demonstrate that the black English/African American vernacular and the standard English language are capable of acting as instruments to testify and voice oppression. The examples from the short stories illustrate how some linguistic aspects play a vital role in depicting membership of a particular community and promote an ethnic identity. To sum up, the grammatical, lexical and phonological aspects related with black English/African American vernacular and oral tradition elucidate inclusion in the community and reiterate the African American cultural and racial identity.

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