

TALKING SUBALTERN: AN INTERPLAY OF SUBALTERNITY AND MAGICAL REALISM IN *SING, UNBURIED, SING*

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ABSTRACT

The study proposes that in the novel Sing, Unburied, Sing, Jesmyn Ward employs the device of magical realism to make the subalterns' narrative distinct from the representation of the black community found in dominant discourse. By tracing the African roots of magical realism and further using this indigenous device to discover the allegedly erased history, the article responds to Spivak's claim that Subaltern cannot speak because they do not have history. The Article further maintains its claim that subaltern can talk by establishing a supporting framework based on the theoretical opinions of Gramsci and Harish Trivedi. The article finds that the deadlock that Spivak's otherwise interesting concept of subaltern creates, is resolved by Ward through the use of Magical Realism, and that the suppressed ones can only avoid this charge of Spivak that ability to speak disarm the representative of subaltern of its own subaltern identity, by coining their own means of narration.

Keywords: subaltern, African Fiction, slavery, magical realism

INTRODUCTION

In the movie Amistad, the group of abducted blacks pass a remark, while waiting for the decision of the case that they have managed to file for their freedom, that in difficult situations they contact the ghosts of their forefathers for help. In the situation, in which the remarks have been passed, such sort of help seems remotely related to their current predicament, but the confidence it builds for the characters shows that their culture has its own remedy for the moment of despair. The current article explores the working of magical realism as a personalized device for those who want to write about subdued lives of subaltern African communities and other than giving them improvised version of foreign voice they discover their own voice through the device of magical realism. By looking closely at the narratives of the dead and their perpetual presence in the lives of alive characters of the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the study shows that once the marginalized stop borrowing narrative devices from the dominant discourse, they can get rid of the representation imposed on them by dominant groups.

Eva Cherniavsky explores the subalternity of black people in the backdrop of America's hegemonic culture. Cherniavsky builds his argument of the subalternity of an American black population by alluding to Spivak's remarks about a poor black female as "the locus of an exemplary discontinuity between the logic of postcoloniality and of racial discrimination" (1996). Racial discrimination is instrumental in silencing blacks. And to speak from within a discriminated group is not an easy task especially when the act of speaking against it using the tropes from a dominant discourse, and thus the ones who speak are reprimanded for leaving the rank of subaltern by performing the very act of speaking. Cherniavsky's treatment of black as subaltern makes it possible for the article to study the black characters with the same lens that Spivak has used to study a subaltern female in her essay.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For Spivak the “subaltern has no history and cannot speak” (1988). By looking at this single pronouncement made in her complex essay, I would start locating inability to speak in the erasure of history. And the possible means to recover that history can be discussed in later sections with special reference to selected text. Spivak relates this erasure with “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1988), and in her interview given 1996 she finds that subaltern for not having a distinctive voice cannot be heard in dominant discourse (Asayesh, 2017). So, the discourse which is ruled by dominant knowledge has no place for a subaltern voice for its lack of distinctiveness. This is important that Spivak does not say that voice is not there, the issue is the lack of distinctiveness. This distinctiveness is important for saving subaltern from misrepresentation and to reduce “the impact of echo of earlier civilizing projects” (Hogan, 2015). By deliberately ignoring the negative sentence written in the end of Spivak’s essay that “subaltern cannot speak” (as for me this “not” has not been used literally rather rhetorically) I would make use the aforementioned terms borrowed from Spivak to look for the possibility for subaltern speech. Such possibility owes a great deal to the recovery of erased past (which still has its traces as imperialistic narratives are ‘palimpsestic’) in nature and to the articulation of distinctive discourse (Spivak, 1988).

The article has tried to locate arguments made in the favor of the possibility for the subaltern to speak out. One such possibility has been highlighted by Gramsci. As the paper's claim is about the indigenous technique of narrative as a suitable tool for making subaltern speak, it does echo the Gramsci’s suggestion made in the context of peasant revolt that the subaltern consciousness of the peasantry, immersed in traditional religion and popular culture, should be nurtured by “organic intellectuals” to unleash the revolutionary potential in them (Chatterjee, 2010). I connect this role of Organic Intellectuals (I would take them as a group of people who can speak for their folk in their own voice) with Ritu Birla’s idea of “training in the imagination which opens new ways to engage with others, ‘not to transcode’ as Spivak puts it, but to draw a response. It is also where one learns to respond responsibly” (Birla, 2010). So here Spivak’s pronouncement regarding inability of subaltern to speak loses its vigor when it comes across agency of organic intellectuals and the ones whose imagination is a trained process.

The possibility of subaltern speaking under the veneer of dominant imperialistic discourse has been discussed by Bhabha as well. Judging from Bhabha’s postulation that “any discursive system is inescapably fragmented in a realm of enunciation, it becomes implicitly legitimate to think that the colonialist text already carried the native voice of the subaltern through its imperialistic ambivalence” (Louai, 2011).

The last nail in the coffin is hit by Harish Trivedi when he writes in the preface of his book *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India*, that this question regarding the speaking agency of subaltern has not been addressed in his book as he claims that the book has cited evidence where subalterns are speaking in their native language. If Subalterns speaking in native language can avoid “repeating the representation simply imposed upon them” (Trivedi, 2000) then the indigenous techniques peculiar to any culture can make this process of speaking even more immune to some extent to this “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1988).

This article’s goal is to inspect the employment of Jasmyn Ward of Magical Realism for the narration of subalterns’ past, and to further explore this technique of Magical realism as an indigenous one by tracing its African roots.

Here I would come back to Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and will rule out one possible answer which would be negative. If a subaltern cannot (never) speak then why this hue and cry? My answer is (or that's how I would summaries concepts regarding subaltern agency to speak) that subaltern has always been speaking but their “small voices” are “drowned in the noise of statist commands” (Guha, 2010). Such small voices are often reduced to silence and subaltern studies are “recovering a silenced subject by amplifying its silence, drawing attention to it, and then eliminating it by giving it a voice, and allowing it to speak (William, 2006). Williams considers the danger that “in attempting to give voice to that silent “other” we run the risk of simply speaking for and from ourselves” (William, 2006). Despite William’s claim about Farah’s novel as a failed attempt of giving voice to one who has been murdered, I found it subaltern’s initiation in the process of speaking out, as the silence here is not presented as absence of speech but rather suppression of speech. The story that Sonyaya could not tell, the ghosts of Jasmyn Ward come back to tell accompanied by heavy use of storytelling tradition among black people.

Black writers have tried to re-write their own history by recording black experience from a black perspective, and Sing, Unburied, Sing makes this attempt by making use of art of storytelling as family culture, this link between African culture and African American storytelling has also been explored before by Levine. "The oral inventiveness of good storytellers, who appear to have been relatively common in black culture, was a source of delight and stimulation to their audiences (Levine, 1977). In Sing, Unburied, Sing, the storytelling by alive and dead characters goes side by side and is found to conform to each other's narratives. Magical realism in Sing, Unburied, Sing is embedded in the progression of narrative where the random appearance of dead ones and their contact with living ones can be found in every move of the plot. This reincarnation emerges as a personalized trope for letting those speak who have been forcefully silenced and to transmit the past as lived. The next section will shed light on magical realism as an intrinsic element of African tradition.

African roots of Magical Realism

"Magical realist texts portray reality in which magical components grow organically out of the world depicted" (Aldes, 2012). Magical realism has a strong connection with African oral traditions and has also made its place in Eurocentric Western rationalism (Grzeda, 2013). The literary tradition of anglophone writers from Chinua Achebe to Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, and Ben Okri, can be found employing negotiation practices that resemble magical realism (Cooper, 1998). In Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road*, the magical realism maintains its presence through the overwhelming presence of spirits "as the spirits dwell as much in the past as the present, on the road as much as in dreams or the spirit world itself, or even the bush. The spirits are, in fact, everywhere" (Cooper, 1998). The perpetual presence of invited or uninvited spirits in Jesmyn Ward's novel speaks for the employment of magical realism, but it is very important to look that this technique has been employed not for creating supernatural mood but to facilitate multiple narratives. The upcoming paragraphs will explore the moments where living and dead come across each other and their narrative intersects.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Singing Dead: Analysis of Unburied Narratives

The novel revolves around the lives of Leonie, her white husband Michael, her son Jojo and daughter, and her parents. The Jojo's childhood is spent under the influence of the stories of his grandparents, addiction of her mother and prejudice of white paternal grandparents, and his character stands out for his ability to see dead people like his grandmother and sister. Though Leonie has the ability to contact the dead, yet usually she is able to see Given when she is under the influence of drugs. For both Leonie or Jojo, the presence of dead in the life of apparently directionless black family shows that they are able (or trying) to find the traces of their past by invoking it either through supernatural ability or through self-prescribed therapy of keeping the memory of dead alive to deal with the dilemmas of the present.

If we exclude the dead narrators, then the novel will look like one of various prevalent accounts of a troubled black family who is either suffering with internal familial rift or external racial prejudice. The form of racial prejudice is more intense as even the presence of blood ties is not enough to fight this prejudice. The dead who had once suffered this prejudice come back to tell their stories or to question their fate that the reader feels that living characters are part of larger historical continuum which is the series of unresolved issues. One such unresolved issue is the life of Leonie who is dependent on the spiritual existence of her dead brother in her life, especially in the moments of despair. But her ability of talking to dead is not presented as caricature to deal with grief but a gift with strong spiritual implications which is disclosed by midwife and accepted by her mother as something peculiar to their people and tradition:

Right there, she told me I had the seed of a gift. With my mama panting in the other room, Marie-Therese took her time, put her hand on my heart, and prayed to the Mothers, to Mami Wata and to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, that I would live long enough to see whatever it was I was meant to see." (Ward, 2018).

Here the article does not address this question whether the ghost of Given is the working of Leonie's mind or he really comes back from the valley of dead. The explanation for the former possibility would require psychological exploration and the latter possibility is the one that interests the aim of this article. The following excerpts from the novel show the way Given maintains his presence in the life of Leonie.

Given that came to me every time I snorted a line, every time I popped a pill. He sat in one of the two empty chairs at the table with us, and leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. He was watching me, like always. He had Mama's face (Ward, 2018)

The ability of Michaela to see Given testifies that the Given is a personification of a silenced past which would maintain its contact with upcoming generations. Given's encounter with Michaela the moment white police officer is insulting the family shows that the past has come back to *present*, and dead are protecting the living ones.

Given reaches out again, this time to Michaela, and it looks as if she sees him, as if he can actually touch her, because she goes rigid all at once, and then a golden toss of vomit erupts from Michaela's mouth and coats the officer's uniformed chest (Ward, 2018).

Michaela 's vomit on the officer's uniform, the moment after she felt the presence of Given for the very first time, speaks for an act of rebellion which owes to the strength given from the dead. Given's character is important for being closely related to main characters but the character of Richie has more pervasive presence that can be felt because of his continuous intrusion in the lives of the characters through Jojo and Michaela. The re-telling of past has been mostly done through the character of Richie.

The re-telling of the past addresses the ambiguities of the past which are very potent to maintain a perpetual existence in the present. This re-telling does also make those facts of black history to perpetuate in the *present* of those who cannot speak because they have been silenced for so long along with their history. Ward's focus on the more relevant pieces of the past where black community suffered by discriminatory law makes her work different from the other works dealing with the atrocities committed against slaves. The character of Richie is the one who tells the stories of a relatively immediate past.

The stories of Jojo's grandfather introduce him to a world of departed souls who keep contacting him for telling their part of the story. The character of Richie is one such character who is introduced by Pop (River) to Jojo as an inmate he meets in prison. Richie recognizes Jojo even though he has never met him. Richie's affiliation with Jojo can be understood through the belief system of African traditional religions that ancestors may influence the world and "want to come back...The ancestor...may help the present generation choose the best path in their current decision making" (Coleman, 2011). Richie's death at a very young age does not allow him to give some sagacious advices yet he relates the stories of suffering to Jojo and to readers.

When I was thirteen, I knew much more than him. I knew that metal shackles could grow into the skin. I knew that leather could split flesh like butter. I knew that hunger could hurt, could scoop me hollow as a gourd, and that seeing my siblings starving could hollow out a different part of me, too.

Probably the most important thing about Richie's character is that he is not only relating his own experience but the ones that had been related to him and he does so with great audacity: Said the mob beat them so bad their eyes disappeared in their swollen heads. There was wax paper and sausage wrappings and bare corn cobs all over the ground. The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both of them were hanged, and the ground all around the roots of the tree was smoking because the mob had set the couple afire, too.

Other than the audacity of his account, the description of Richie makes his spiritual existence fairly tangible:

Richie leans forward, leans so close that if he had breath, it would be hitting me in the face, stinking up my nose. I have seen pictures of toothbrushes from the 40's. Big as hair brushes, bristles look metal. I wonder if they even had them up there, in Parchman.

The encounter of Richie is not presented as a chance happening but as an episode of an ongoing process. Richie found himself right among black faces who are passing by and then he is brought to Jojo. Richie's meeting with Jojo stands for the perpetual connection between dead and living ones.

Coming back to the connection between the device of magical realism and subalternity, the novel has used magical realism to rediscover the past which has (partially) been erased as spirits are presented as moving freely through the channels of past and present. Ward's conception of the character like Richie tells that African community is knit with strong spiritual connections where generations are in contact with each other. Jesmyn Ward's use of magical realism challenges "western rationality" (Manglosa, 2012) and her focus on immediate to distant past shows that subalterns are not only speaking but handing down the stories of past and thus influencing both present and future.

In last chapter of the novel, Jasmyn encompasses the past of in an amalgam of multiple narratives: They speak with their eyes: He raped me and suffocated me until I died. I put my hands up

and he shot me eight times. She locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies... they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me. I was still sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe (Ward, 2018).

Micheala's conversation with the dead, their refusal to leave and subsequent implicit act of leaving for *home* is associated with the sense of peace they feel after telling their stories: "Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease".

CONCLUSION

By making dead more expressive about their suffering and living ones relatively subdued about their tumultuous lives, the author agrees (though momentarily) with Spivak that when the subaltern tries to represent their group, they leave the subaltern identity by initiating the very act of representation. I found that Spivak is making both readers and writers cautious that representations might involve the devices of dominant discourse and to avoid this complicity Jesmyn Ward employs supernatural elements to give voice to departed souls. The dead (who were once subaltern) speaks along with and for their alive fellows by very tactfully avoiding the Spivak's charge of complicity with dominant discourse. The connection with dead has been presented as unique trait of African culture and does not carry the stigma of employing literary styles borrowed from dominant literature. I found Jesmyn Ward's novel as a record of communal narrative which is in the process of discovering the past and making sense of the present, and other nourishing the desire of being heard by *Centre*, Ward has managed to establish *Center* for those who have been forced to the margins.

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