Language and Narrative Technique in African–American Autobiography

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Language is an expressive aspect of literature. So far as the use of language in the autobiographies of Langston Hughes, Era Bell Thompson and H. Rap Brown is concerned it is seen that they have combined standard American English with the Black dialect. This Black dialect is also called African American Vernacular English or African American English or Black English or Black Vernacular or Black English Vernacular or even Ebonic. It is observed that the lives of the Blacks and their experiences were so unique, varied and colourful that the standard American English of mainstream literature alone was unable to describe them in their totality. Therefore, African American writers have used a number of vocabulary items in addition to the peculiar linguistic features and conversational expressions from Black dialect to capture the specific moods of the writers and their characters to enable the readers to understand the distinct shades of meanings of their diverse life experiences.

The study of the autobiographies of Era Bell Thompson, Langston Hughes and H. Rap Brown shows that they have used many words and expressions from the Black dialect to give the flavour of Black sensibility and Black experiences effectively and precisely, which would have otherwise been superficial rendering of the Black life. The outstanding feature of these autobiographies is that the language used in them is simple but more communicative and lacks the futile efforts of artificial embellishment on the part of the writers. These writers prefer to use some vocabulary items and conversational expressions from their own dialect without distorting its original fervour and meaning, which is contrary to the practice of mainstream literature. Of course, there are few African American writers who have made special attempts to make their language elegant in order to impress the upper class readers, even so, it is their vernacular that has been more effective in creating the aesthetic sense in their expressions.

However, many scholars have criticized these autobiographers for the use of Black vernacular in their literary works. They are of the opinion that the use of crude Black dialects for writing literature reflects the African American writers’ ignorance of literary traditions, their poor schooling, their low intelligence and also their poor taste in the matters of arts. Unfortunately, such vague remark about Black writers and their use of Black dialects have terribly influenced some of the African Americans, particularly belonging to upper class and have made them feel angry and humiliated thereby leading to the social disharmony and racial polarization.

But these critics, it seems, have forgotten the fact that natural language of African Americans is more suitable to communicate the experiences of their lives than the artificial language borrowed and appropriated from the upper class Whites. What the critics call as ignorance of African American writers, in fact, is their disregard for the mainstream literary tradition. At this stage, it would be worthwhile to consider the opinion of Max Eastman about the relative importance of subject-matter and language in a work of art. He says:
“Poetic speech is not so much an art as a natural material in which artists may
work. And the material is life itself, in so far as words can assist in making it
conscious or communicating it.”

It means the genuine life experiences of the artist are more important than the kind of language
he uses in a work of art. And so the distinctive life experiences of the Blacks are more important
than the language used to express them. However, it is worthwhile to note that the Black
vernacular has enough potential to communicate those experiences more effectively than the
standard language. Hence, the use of native and vernacular language is undeniably justified in
the literary works of African American writers.

Similar thought is also expressed by Kevin J. Quail in his article Hughes’ The Big Sea. He is of the opinion that it was not only the language but also the subject-matter that caused embarrassment for the critics. And so the promising writer like Langston Hughes was condemned by them for writing about the lives of lower-class Negroes using their dialect. Kevin J. Quail adds:

“In one of his compilations, Fine Clothes to the Jew, he wrote about things
like boys working in brass spittoons and girls in red stockings; his voice
sometimes taking on the vernacular of a southern black drawl. This rhetorical
style was not always appreciated. For, Hughes was often criticized by blacks
as being a “disgrace to the race, a return to the dialect tradition, and a parading
of all our racial defects before the public.”

It means even the Black critics did not like African American writers writing about their realistic life-experiences in their works using the Black dialect as they considered it to be humiliating for their race.

Era Bell Thompson spent most of her childhood and early youth in North Dakota where she rarely came across many Black people. Her only contact with the Black community and their language was her own family. She had migrated to various places in order to fulfill her desire of getting education. Even she had spent few years of her life working as a maid in a White family. Since her school days, she had been writing for Chicago Defender. And from that time, she had developed her own style of writing with an emphasis on humour. Langston Hughes had also similar background. Even for few years, he had been to the college. All these aspects of the lives of Era Bell and Langston are responsible for relatively more use of refined, polished language in their autobiographies. But it doesn’t mean that they have not at all used the words and expressions from the Black dialect in their life stories. In American Daughter, there are incidents, particularly when Era Bell was living with her parents in North Dakota, which contain many words and expressions from the Black vernacular. For example: The use of ‘gonna’ to indicate indefinite future in “Who’s gonna git them rascals in a barn when you can’t even git close enough to read the brand…” (American Daughter, p.39), is a special feature of Black vernacular. Other dialectical features reflected in American Daughter are realization of the velar nasal /ŋ/ as the alveolar nasal /n/ as in “Stop talkin’? What you sayin’, son? That man stop talkin’ he’d die sure as you’re born (p.76) and multiple negation in “I ain’t never told you to go fightin’ no policeman” (p.21). Similarly, Langston Hughes’ autobiography has the vernacular expressions like “There ain’t no ‘any kind of a job’ here” (double negation, p.146) and “Yes, suh, I reckon we is.”(use of ‘is’ instead of ‘are’, p.289). Langston Hughes has also used the words like Kike, spick, and hunky from the Black dialect.
However, compared to Era Bell Thompson and Langston Hughes, H. Rap Brown has made more powerful and effective use of various features of Black vernacular in his autobiography. Actually, it is full of vernacular expressions making it one of the most fearless and vibrant Black autobiographies ever written. The reason, it seems, is that here Rap Brown is more of a social and political activist than a writer. Throughout his book, one comes across a number of expressions that speak about the natural anger of the Blacks towards the Whites and their institutions. His words and expressions seem to be as dangerous and acerbic as the bullets of a gun.

For example, H. Rap Brown has used the expressions like “you my home-boy, and the dude who ain’t from around here, he ain’t one of us” (use of ‘ain’t’ instead of ‘isn’t’, p.16), “What you the police or something?” (omission of copula verb ‘be’, p.86), and “Naw, I just – I say don’t be coming through here that fast.” (to express habitual/continuative aspect, p.86). These expressions certainly have the force and vibrancy of the Black vernacular. Not only this but there are also other powerful words and phrases like mutherfucka, shit, fuck, ol’ lady, ol’ man, bitch, dude, cracker, bootlicking, ass-kissing, white folks, buddy, crock of shit, etc. which are not considered appropriate to be used in literature by the mainstream literary critics.

In his personal life, too, Rap Brown had learnt to use the words as weapons. In fact, he was so famous at the word-plays called ‘dozens’ and ‘signifying’ that he had received ‘Rap’ as his nickname. In the game of ‘signifying’, only the rival is verbally attacked, whereas the ‘dozens’ is a game that aims at destroying the opponent by using insulting words which are usually directed towards his mother. One comes across the examples of both ‘dozens’ and ‘signifying’ in Die Nigger Die! The example of the ‘dozens’ is:

“I fucked your mama
Till she went blind.
Her breath smells bad,
But she sure can grind.
I fucked your mama
For a solid hour.
Baby came out
Screaming, Black Power.
Elephant and the Baboon
Learning to screw.
Baby came out looking
Like Spiro Agnew.”

Here the opponent’s image is completely destroyed by using abusive words about his mother. The example of ‘signifying’ is:

“Man, you must don’t know who I am.
I’m sweet peeter jeeter the womb beater
The baby maker the cradle shaker
The deerslayer the buckbinder the woman finder Known from the Gold Coast to rocky shores of Maine Rap is my name and love is my game.”
As this kind of language has direct sexual overtones, traditional aesthetics does not approve its use in literary works. It is considered to be lacking in good taste and so improper for the literature of ‘good’ people. Even some critics call it harmful for the health of a society and so African American writers are criticized for using this kind of language. But this language is the part and parcel of the lives of common African Americans and to create the realistic effect, such kind of words and phrases are naturally used. It should not be forgotten that their language was the medium through which they had taken the experiences of the miseries of their lives. So its use in their literature was quite justifiable as there was no demarcation line between their literature and lives. This use of the vernacular helps these writers to connect their art to their personal experiences and also to the experiences of their community. It enables them to collapse the man-made barriers and develop a meaningful communication between the common people and the art. That is why the autobiographies of African American writers have succeeded to attract a large number of readers towards them and have also encouraged them to try their hands at artistic expression.

As The Big Sea, American Daughter and Die Nigger Die! are autobiographical accounts of the lives, respectively of Langston Hughes, Era Bell Thompson and H. Rap Brown, the ‘first person narrative technique’ is essentially employed in them. All the three autobiographies begin as well as end with first person pronouns. And therefore, as it happens with all other literary works written in first person narrative style, these stories create the much required sense of authenticity with reference to the material presented by the writer, and at the same time, it also enables to invoke a close aesthetic distance between the author and his work, which is an important aspect of any literary work. It helps the writer to personalize his narrative, making the presentation more convincing for the readers.

However, it doesn’t mean that these writers go on narrating all the trivial details of their lives because such incidents can make their literary works unexciting for the readers. Therefore, the writer has to resort to the method of selection and omission which helps him to select only the most necessary and interesting events from his life and omit the others. This narrative technique is called ‘ellipses. This technique allows the writer to omit:

“a portion of the sequence of events, allowing the reader to fill in the narrative gaps. An ellipsis in narrative leaves out a portion of the story. This can be used to condense time, or as a stylistic method to allow the reader to fill in the missing portions of the narrative with their imagination.”

This narrative technique enables the readers to infer the most possible events that might have taken place during the elapsed time with the help of the changes the writer has made in his characters and events.

Langston Hughes and H. Rap Brown have made the use of this technique very effectively in telling their life stories. For example; the readers are told very little about the actual events that might have taken place during the years when Langston and Rap Brown were getting their formal education. So their school-life is everybody’s guess. The readers are required to use their imagination and fill the gaps between their early childhood and young age. But this is not the case with Era Bell Thompson. Her autobiography provides much more details about her life as a student first in Miss Breen’s school in Driscoll, followed by her schooling in North Ward junior High in Bismarck, business college, Dr. Riley’s Morningside College and finally in Chicago.
The writers also use ‘exposition’ as a narrative technique to convey the required information between the events. To achieve his purpose, the writer may use various devices like letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, dialogues and even the inner-workings of the minds of his characters. This technique is successfully used by Langston Hughes, Era Bell Thompson and H. Rap Brown in their autobiographies. There is a lot of information given through the dialogues in which Langston, Era Bell and Rap Brown are engaged and also from their thoughts interspersed throughout their works. Even these writers have made effective use of the technique of letter-writing (e.g. American daughter, p.217 and p.229; The Big Sea, p. 213; Die Nigger Die!-p. 105-07, 114-115, 116-117) which helps them to provide the information between the events. Langston Hughes has also made use of newspaper clippings (The Big Sea, p. 229 to 232), which enables him to provide the information about the craze of organizing social parties. The most important feature, both Langston Hughes and H. Rap Brown have used, is the inclusion of poems, which really make the readers aware of the inner workings of their minds.

Another technique used by Langston Hughes and Era Bell Thompson is ‘incluing’ through which the readers are gradually exposed to background information about the world in which the story is set. Here the writer carries the readers into the world he is building. But this act of the author is so skillful that the readers hardly become aware of it. In American Daughter, Era Bell begins her story by telling the readers about her birth, and then slowly but gradually provides them with all the background information about the cruel White world which forms the real background to her life-story. The same can be said about Langston Hughes’ autobiography.

The narrative technique of ‘flashback’ enables the author to take his narrative back in time from its present point of time. Here the author discontinues the present sequence of events and goes back in time to narrate the events of the past. Sometimes, the writer carries his story forward in time from the present to narrate the expected events of his story. This narrative technique is called ‘flash-forward’. Such techniques help the writer to develop and sustain the interest of the readers in his narrative. In The Big Sea, Langston Hughes begins his story by telling the readers how as a young man of nineteen, he threw all his books from the board of S.S. Malone into the sea. But in the very next chapter, he takes the readers back into his early childhood days and goes on speaking at length about his family, his attempt at saving his soul, his schooling and his visit to his father in Mexico and his illness. These events cover the period of his life up to 1919. And again suddenly in the Chapter entitled, I’ve Known Rivers, he takes the readers back to the month of November 1918 and speaks about the end of World War I and its effects. Then again the readers are taken to the year 1923 when he visited Africa. The use of the flashback and flash-forward devices help Langston Hughes to make the readers familiar with his childhood and his school-days as it is necessary to know the background of the young Negro boy who has just thrown his books into the sea. Though there is a chronological sequence of events in the life-story of Era Bell, H. Rap Brown has used ‘flashback’ and ‘flash-forward’ methods, particularly when he has written about his days in prison.

Another narrative technique used by Langston Hughes in his autobiography is ‘medias in res’. It is a Latin phrase which means ‘into the middle of things’. It allows the writer to begin his story either at the middle or at the end thereby providing enough scope to launch the ‘setting and character, and conflict via flashback and expository conversations relating the pertinent past.’ Following this technique, Langston Hughes has begun his story into the middle, when at the age of nineteen, he had taken a job as a sailor on S.S. Malone and was sailing towards Africa.
‘Historical present’ is a narrative technique that makes deliberate use of present tense to narrate the events of the past in order to make them more vivid and dramatic. It is used particularly in the conversations with the intention to show that one event is more important to others. In all the autobiographies under investigation, there is ample use of this technique. For example, in American Daughter, Era Bell Thompson writes about the conversation between Tony Thompson and his wife, Mary that was already a thing of past, but here she uses present tense: “Where’s he been? I give him carfare every day. He comes down to the place at four-thirty as usual.”(p.21). Similarly, the past events, “You can learn anything you put your mind to…And engineering is something that will make you some money. What do you want to do, live like a nigger all your life?”(The Big Sea, p.61) and “the white workers go their way and leave him to go his. They’re nice and friendly on the job…They don’t want their friends thinking that they’re nigger lovers” (Die Nigger die!, P.9) have been narrated in present tense by Langston Hughes and H. rap Brown, respectively.

The writer also uses ‘surprise factor’ as a narrative device that “provides the audience with the twist or punch line, intended to elicit amusement. However, it can also be used to elicit a tragic reaction, rather than a comic one.” Era Bell Thompson is very famous for using humour in her works. For example, she begins her story like this: “My Lord, it’s a girl!” Pop stumbled blindly out into the kitchen, slumped into a chair, and again said, “Oh, my Lord!” Now, my Lord had heretofore been very good to my father, for he had three sons: Tom, Dick, and Harry.”(p.13) Here the twist or punch comes with the last sentence when Era Bell says that God had been good to her father before as He had given him three sons. But the real punch, of course very tragic, comes when the readers are told that it was not his ‘three sons’ but only his ‘daughter’ who was present by his bed-side at the time of his death.

Thus the skillful combination of various narrative techniques supplemented by effective presentation of the life experiences of the concerned writers have made these autobiographies lively and interesting from the readers’ point of view.

Works Cited:
4. Ibid, p.27.