

Resistance through Orality (and Silence) in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Dessa Rose*

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, African-Americans have used the oral tradition not merely as a means to communicate, but also as a weapon to resist suppression and discrimination. The paper presents an analysis of the use of orality, or the deliberate suspension of it, as a tool to resist oppression and objectification in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Dessa Rose*. It further discusses how black women used orality and silence as a tool for fortification against the aggressions of slavery and for the assertion of their personal, socio- cultural and political identities. The paper concludes with a discussion of how, in the end, orality and literacy work in harmony to effectively represent the particularities of black slave women's experiences and keep the memories of their struggles alive.

Keywords: African- American literature, literacy, orality, resistance, slave- narratives, self-representation

INTRODUCTION

Orality, "the exercise of human verbal communication" (Warner-Lewis, 2004, p.117), has been a "predominant trait" (John, 2004, p.2) of African American society. A great part of this cultural tradition that came to the Americas transported through the slave ships, survives in the

forms of narrative proverbs, song-tales, myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes, ballads etc. both in the oral as well as in the literary form (Killens and Ward, 1992, p.7). These forms are still being used to fulfill the primary function of a way of making sense of this complex world. Even though this function of the oral tradition is common to most of the cultures of the world, specifically in Africa, orality has been a major channel of communicating knowledge from one generation to another. The ancient West African tradition of the griots is a living example of this. The griots

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have been the guardian of their tribes' oral history and genealogy. This griot- like quality is also found in the oral traditions that the slaves traded to America brought with them (Hall, 1994, p. 92). Even though the brutal and oppressive life of slavery deprived them of a lot of cultural and religious traditions they brought along, many of those traditions survived, especially orality (Atkinson, 2000, p.13). In the absence of any access to literacy, the blacks had only one of the most ancient tools of communication to fall back upon, their tongue. The tongue was their pen, paper and notebook. The spoken word was their carrier of messages and histories of struggle against the hegemonic white culture. However, for the majority of blacks especially, the black women, orality was their major weapon against the triple oppression of sex, race and class. In *Speaking Power*, Do Veanna S. Fulton (2006) defines orality as, "a speech act that resists or subverts oppression, and controls representations, thereby substantiating subjectivity" (p.13). Here, orality is not just a medium to convey the black traditions; rather it is a means to assert their humanity. Unlike oral discourse, Fulton (2006) says, orality is political in nature (p.13). Fulton (2006) emphasizes that the Black feminist orality "is the foundation of a literary tradition of African American women's writing that is the progeny of a cultural tradition of verbally articulating the self and experience" (p.2). The black women writers' representations of black femininity in their texts too are fraught with these oral characteristics. It is this politics of

orality that has been used as a tool by black writers. Black women novelists have been writing the experiences of black women; articulating through different voices the condition of their being during and after slavery. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Ann Williams are two texts where we can see how orality was used by black women as a fortification against the aggressions of slavery. Though, both the texts have a gap of around 125 years between them, they deal with the theme of self-representation and self-definition of black women during slavery. Like all classical slave narratives, both the texts trace their protagonists' journey from property to personhood, a journey complicated by their pregnancy and maternity. Both the texts are life stories of women who narrate their stories of terror, trauma, and resistance in a language steeped in the black American tongue.

The paper presents an analysis of the use of orality, or the deliberate suspension of it, as a tool to resist oppression and objectification in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Dessa Rose*. It further discusses how black women used orality and silence as a tool for fortification against the aggressions of slavery and for the assertion of their personal, socio- cultural and political identities. The paper concludes with a discussion of how, in the end, orality and literacy work in harmony to effectively represent the particularities of black slave women's experiences and keep the memories of their struggles alive.

ORALITY / SILENCE AND RESISTANCE

The first and foremost efforts of resistance by black women are visible in the way they try to make sense of their history. During slavery, devoid of any 'literate' means of doing so, they transferred history through orality. A desire for genuine self-representation, as against 'official' representations in history books written predominantly by the white male historians, made even the literate amongst the black take recourse to the oral history of their people. These texts, especially by women writers, were mostly autobiographical in nature. In proposing the notion that the autobiographical self is an "attempt to recreate or represent a historical self in language," Henry Louis Gates (1987) argues that we must "insist upon the recognition and identification of the black autobiographical tradition as the positing of fictive black selves in language" (p.123). In answering the question as to whether the use of existing genres was found too restrictive by these writers, Johnnie M. Stover (2003) states that this usage developed out of emotional need and not out of deliberate forethought since these autobiographies reflect the fragmented self of each writer (p. 6).

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the writer, Harriet Jacobs, assumes the pseudonym of Linda Brent. Jacobs traces her life experiences as "Linda Brent" from her early days of childhood innocence when she did not realize what it was to be a slave, through her sexual harassment at the hands of Dr. Flint and other brutalities

of slavery, to the purchase of her freedom by Mrs. Bruce. *Incidents* focuses on two specific evils of slavery: how it degraded the black female slave and how it separated the members of black families.

Incidents narrates the various acts of resistance used by Linda and other slaves to nullify the oppressions of enslavement; Jacobs (Linda) depends on orality to narrate her grandmother and great grandmother's history:

She [Linda's grandmother] was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go St. Augustine, where they had relatives. It was during the revolutionary war; and they were captured on their passage, carried back and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me. (p.5)

Therefore, Jacob's written narrative gives credit to the stories told by her grandmother. The history of a people needed to be passed on and in Jacobs's story the grandmother through her orality and Jacobs through her literacy is able to do that.

Trying to avoid the repetition of what her great-grandmother went through, Linda can be seen engaged in an effort to keep her family together. Using orality, she asserts her rights as a mother even at the risk of being caught doing so. Fulton (2006) says that the power of orality is central

to the empowerment of Linda Brent and her children's freedom (p.37). Realizing that Mr. Sands was not going to fulfill the promise of freeing their children, Linda comes out of hiding and asserts her rights as a mother, declaring "Stop one moment, and let me speak for my children." Fulton (2006) argues that the act is "exceptionally consequential" (p.37). Since slavery had left the blacks with broken families and here Linda's act of raising her voice should be seen as an effort at making the father of her children ashamed of his incapacity at protecting them as well as her attempt at keeping the family intact.

Alternately, Linda's grandmother is a woman who uses silence to withstand the trauma of broken family caused by slavery. Stover (2003) considers silence be a "mother tongue resistive technique" (p. 106). Such structures, Stover (2003)) further argues, "force readers to pause and consider possible subversive or masked authorial intents embodied in such usage" (p.106) The history that Linda's grandmother narrates to Linda is full of unspoken facts, like the paternity of her five children. Here, silence is used to construct an image of a woman who has no control over her life choices. Thus, she should not be judged by the white standards of Victorian Cult of True Womanhood that "required women to be pure, chaste, angelic and pious upholders of moral values" (Zafar & Khan, 2010, p.2). Jacobs (1987) emphasizes on this clearly when she says, "I feel that the slave woman should not be judged by the same standards as others" (p.56). It is another attempt of resistance that

we witness in this text, which is against the prevalent stereotype of the black woman as sexually promiscuous. In opposition to this kind of predominant white attitude, Jacobs projects an ideal woman, her Grandmother, who can be fitted in the aforementioned Cult of True Womanhood. Yet, the image of the grandmother as depicted in *Incidents* is an expression of the conflict that Jacobs goes through as a black woman who has to justify her decision to have children out of wedlock to her mainly white female readers of the North. Jacobs cautions her "gentle readers" not to judge Linda too harshly when she confesses to the sexual affair, "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!" (p.54). Stover (2003) argues that even in her plea, she does not maintain a passive stance, but makes the subject of sexual abuse against slave women a public and political issue (p.124). Incidentally, Brent's mother is a figure whose history is narrated to her through her grandmother. The long-gone mother, as portrayed in *Incidents* is one of the most virtuous women. She lived the life of a black man's wife. Linda hears people speak kindly of her dead mother who was a slave "merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly" (p.5). Through the knowledge of her mother's character conveyed by her grandmother's stories, Jacobs can confidently juxtapose her mother's image with her own image and can confront her image as a 'fallen woman' in

the eyes of her readers, thereby, leading to an act of self-definition. Jean Fagan Yellin (1989, p. 92) writes that with women's issues as its impetus, *Incidents* is "an attempt to move women to political action". She further states in her introduction to *Incidents* that "Jacobs moves her book out of the world of conventional nineteenth-century polite discourse" (p. xiv) that expected women to be silent. The use of rhetorical questions in the text, as exemplified by her abovementioned plea to her white readers, "becomes an outlet for members of a society whose voices were denied; the technique allows them to make their opinion heard without appearing to be making a declaratory statement" (Stover, 2003, p.125).

This striving for self-representation and self-definition by blacks is a characteristic of *Dessa Rose* too. Sherley Anne Williams's novel, written in the genre of the neo-slave narrative, a genre comprising contemporary narratives that reimagine slavery, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, begins with the question of who has the right to tell a slave's story. Williams introduces a white character, Adam Nehemiah, the author of "The Master's Complete Guide to Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents," who interviews Dessa in prison for a book he is writing on slave uprisings. In the first section of the novel, when Dessa tells her story to Nehemiah, it becomes evident that the white writer is unable to grasp the full human import of Dessa's life and experience. Blinded by his own aspirations to become an important southern author servicing the

interests of the slaveholding class, he cannot see Dessa as more than a "darky" who might provide important clues leading toward the capture of the escaped slaves and the prevention of future slave rebellions. Dessa, however, increasingly realizes the power of her narrative to influence Nehemiah, and by dropping appropriate clues she sends him on a hunt for a maroon settlement, during which time she manages to escape from prison.

Dessa's lapse into a reverie about the history of her family and their fate as chattel slaves which she heard from her "mammy's" mouth (p.126)" and her frequent inclusion of fellow- slaves, Harker, Nathan, Clara, and Miz Lady in her own account indicate towards her efforts to carve out a new family when her family of origin has been frequently ripped apart. In one of the most striking episodes of the novel, we see Dessa recoiling against the casualness with which Rufel refers to her 'Mammy'. According to David Pilgrim (2012), "Mammy is the most well known and enduring racial caricature of African American women. From slavery through the Jim Crow era, the mammy image served the political, social, and economic interests of mainstream white America. During slavery, the mammy caricature was posited as proof that blacks -- in this case, black women -- were contented, even happy, as slaves. Her wide grin, hearty laughter, and loyal servitude were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery." To Rufel 'Mammy' is a woman with no history or identity except the one she gets to know during her own life. Dessa bursts into anger." "Mammy

ain't nobody name, not they real one." She challenges Rufel to give her 'Mammy's' name which Rufel in turn is unable to do. Dessa speaks out against the objectification of the black mother figure as just a nursing maid, "See! See! You don't even not know 'mammy's' name. Mammy have a name, have children" (p.125). She calls Rufel on it and brings to light the fact that Mammy not only had a name but she may also have children: an identity separate from what she was to Rufel as a servant. Here, Dessa's challenge highlights how naming functions in the reconstruction of black identities to construct, "an oral resistance to the physical destruction of familial relationship caused by slavery" (Fulton, 2006, p.5). Dessa resists by inserting in her story the personal memories, names, and stories that have been excluded or misnamed by the dominant power.

The act of naming especially requires a consideration here because it is through naming that an important part of an individual's identity is constructed. It tells us about the legitimacy and mastery of some individuals' voices and words over others'. It is also what Fulton (2006) says "a powerful method to claim parental identity and challenge the prohibition of naming their masters as the fathers of their children" (p.33) as the legitimate father of the child would disown her/ him, and the child would be left with an incomplete self-identity. Thus, *Incidents* by Harriet Jacobs can be seen as a narrative of resistance involving what Harryette Mullen (1992) calls "resistant orality" (p.246). Even with

a pseudonym Jacobs makes her true voice heard through the narrative. By disguising herself as Linda Brent, she reconstructs a free self. In an effort to construct independent selves for her children, she takes Mr. Sands as her lover. This decision is directed towards the goal of having children that she can claim for herself and to prevent the inevitability of having children through her master, for she knows that "as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold off to get rid of them"(p.56). The father of her children Mr. Sands is not unwilling that her children "should bear his name" (p.63) but Linda thinks that her children should have Christian names that will legitimize them, as Mr. Sand's name would not be accepted at the baptism. Thus, her first child is named after Linda's rebellious uncle Benjamin, "the slave who dared to feel like a man (p.15)", thereby making sure that the coming generations can know which lineage they come from. In fact, here naming is an act of self-definition for Linda and her children. Unlike the forceful renaming done by each new master that asserts the "master's ownership to the wider world" (Emmelhainz, 2012, p.171), here, Linda's naming her children is independent of the master/ slave relations and a declaration of self-representation by the oppressed.

In the case of Dessa, her various names throughout the novel *Dessa Rose* are symbolic of the various 'eyes' through which an oppressed black woman is seen. Rufel on her part sexually denigrates Dessa as a "Wench". It is in continuation of Nemi's racial nomenclature of Dessa as a "Darky".

The two names, denigrating a black woman on sexual and racial basis are the outsiders' representation of a woman who is mostly silent in the first two sections the book with the names "The Darky" and "The Wench". However, in the third section titled "The Negress", we hear a different voice, the voice of the Negress herself. This voice Fulton (2006) observes to be "simply a narrative of a Black woman, defined by race and gender without pejorative designations to her sexuality, race or class" (p.112). Interestingly, not only Dessa but Rufel is also called by various names like Ruth, Elizabeth, Mrs. Ruint, Mz. Lady, etc. This indicates towards the elements of liquidity and flexibility involved in the whole process of naming, a process that takes its shape according to the perspective of the people that participate in it. For her 'Mammy' Elizabeth Ruth was "'Fel, Rufel'" (p.132). This pet name changes to 'Mrs. Ruint' for the blacks around her perhaps because of the ruined condition she is living in. She, in turn, pet names Dessa's son as "Button". However, Dessa wants to name her son after her rescuers who were responsible for his free birth and not after her husband so that she "would not rake it up each time she called her son's name" (p.159). So, Rufel suggests "Desmond", a name that represents Dessa as well as her rescuers' initials. Here, paradoxically, Rufel, a white woman, becomes instrumental in the process of naming a black child. But the child is not named after a master. In fact, his name carries not only his father's name "Cain" as his surname, but also a whole history

of his mother's freedom from slavery. The pleasure that Rufel gets from naming Button makes her identify herself with her Mammy, put herself into her position and feel the secret pleasure that Mammy might have felt when she gave her master's child a pet name Rufel (p.160). By the end of the text, this kind of identification of herself with the black community lets Rufel be more or less at peace with Dessa. However, Nemi remains the same man. He starts with an ambition to get an "objective" account of the slave rebellion but Dessa frustrates his efforts, sometimes with her silence and sometimes answering in "a random manner, a loquacious, roundabout fashion – if indeed she can be brought to answer them at all" (p.16). In the first part, we witness a struggle between the writer Nehemiah and Dessa's alternate use orality and silence against victimization. Andree-Anne Kekeh (1994, p.222) says that a perpetual clash between Dessa's tale, grounded in things recalled, and the 'scientific facts dear to Nemiah, is conveyed throughout the novel. *Dessa Rose* is an explication of how African Americans "survived by word of mouth" as Williams (1987) says in her *Author's Note*, "and made of that process a high art" since literature and writing have often "betrayed" them (pp. ix- x). Dessa's orality highlights the limitations of literacy, when it comes to the expression of and understanding of complex states of the human psychology. For example, Dessa's outbursts when she vehemently articulates her reasons for rebelling and trying to kill white men, "I kill white mens ... I kill the white mens the

same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can”, are beyond the comprehension of Nehemiah. He finds it “an entrancing recital” (p.13). At the same time, he is totally incompetent at empathizing with Dessa because he considers her a “darky”, hence something subhuman. Later Dessa uses her orality for her freedom by communicating with her rescuers through singing in a call-and-response pattern from her cell, asking the question,

*Tell me, sister; tell me, brother,
How long will it be
That a poor sinner got to suffer,
suffer here?*

She is joined by a chorus, and answered by a rough baritone, singing at a faster tempo against the original pace,

*Oh, it won't be long.
Say it won't be long, sister,
Poor sinner got to suffer, suffer
here. (pp. 64-65)*

This act of communal bonding is achieved through a common coded language in the garb of spiritual that Nemi's literate mind is incapable of comprehending. In keeping with what Fulton (2006) calls, “the tradition of trickster tales in African American folklore (p.111)”, we see Dessa misleading Nemi into a false search for fugitive slaves, which eventually leads to her freedom. However, Nemi in his inability to have a deeper vision of human

psyche could only regret that, “she was so deep as to give never an indication that they were then lurking about” (p.71). Nemi reconstructs Dessa's history according to his prejudices and claims, “I got her down here in my books” (p.254). But, in fact, Dessa has nothing but her memories of Kaine to give, something that Nemi never tries to understand. In the case of Linda, even though she is literate, she uses her orality against her sexual oppression. She denies her literacy to Dr. Flint when he secretly tries to pass over to her his notes detailing his sexually exploitive intentions by saying, “I can't read them, sir” (p.31). By doing so, Linda is able to escape being a participant in her victimization, says Fulton (p.38). This brings us to the limitations of literacy as a tool for empowerment for black women during slavery.

What is interesting then is how literary critics have always emphasized on the importance of literacy and the act of writing one's self into freedom through authorship of slave narratives. Henry Louis Gates (1988) argues that literacy is the sign of reason, which is the sign of one's humanity. However, texts like *Incidents* and *Dessa Rose* contest this stand. Fulton (2006) writes, “William's text suggests recorded history of American slavery- written largely by white males- both objectifies black women and ignores them as historical actors with agency and humanity. The novel demands revised histories, including those recorded by black women” (p.112). Through Dessa's story Williams is doing exactly that. By the end of the novel we see Dessa sitting among

her descendents, telling and retelling her story, because “ Child learn a lot of things setting between some grown person’s legs” (p.257). However, she is not so suspicious of literacy now, even though she says, “I will never forget Nemi trying to read me. Knowing I had put myself in his hands” (p.260). Her resistance to being “read” is successful at last. On the other hand, Jacobs, despite being literate, uses orality as the basis of her narrative. Fulton argues that Jacobs’s literacy does not discount the power of orality rather juxtaposes the tradition of oral history of her grandmother with the conventions of the sentimental novels to construct characters that represent the particularities of black slave women’s experiences (p.15).

CONCLUSION

Both the texts raise the issue of historical interpretation and exemplify the ways in which historical constructions are deeply embedded in dominant ideologies and work as instruments of power leading to the oppression and dehumanization of ‘the other’. However, the protagonists of both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as well as *Dessa Rose* use their orality and silence to resist oppression and objectification. Yet, in the process, they do not undermine the significance of literacy either. Jacobs’ literacy empowers her to tell her story to the world outside and *Dessa* as well acknowledges the importance of writing when she makes one of her grandchildren, “wr(i)te it down”. Her request that “the child say it back to me”(p.260) suggests that

both orality and literacy work in harmony to fulfill one necessity that is to keep the memories of her struggles alive, for “ we have paid for our children’s place in the world again and again” (p.260).

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