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(Post-)Colonial Silence(s) and Critical Practice(s): Some Perspectives on Waseem Anwar's "Black" Women's Dramatic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This article comments on Waseem Anwar's book *"Black" Women's Dramatic Discourse: A Psychosemiotic Study of Silence in Selected Plays by African American Women Dramatists* to illustrate how the essential plurality of postmodern critical practices, in spite of their overt emphasis on anti-traditionalism, are rhetorically governed by academic jargon that is a multifaceted tradition in its own right. In doing so, it will introduce the reader to Waseem Anwar's critique, in the wake of postcolonial studies, of the dialogic nature of language in evaluations of race and gender.

Keywords: postmodern criticism, postcolonialism, silence, black women, Afro-American drama, dialogic representation

Introduction

This brief paper aims at offering some perspectives on the responsibilities of being a postcolonial and postmodern critic through a qualitative interpretative analysis of Waseem Anwar's book *"Black" Women's Dramatic Discourse: A Psychosemiotic Study of Silence in Selected Plays by African American Women Dramatists* (2009). In doing so, it will emphasize how the ambivalence surrounding the semantics of silence in such an analysis as Anwar's needs to be contextualized for a full understanding by its evolution in western metaphysics. Interdisciplinary in spirit, Anwar's book employs the jargon related to many modern and postmodern literary theoretical concepts and so, besides analyzing works by selected African American women dramatists, the book is of some value for the light it throws on critical debates that, springing back in the 1960s from the gigantic watershed of post structuralism and postcolonialism, increasingly involve oxymoronic negotiation of unifications and separations, interactions and dichotomies.

While it is truistic that in general terms postmodernism refers disparagingly to "historical traditions" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 14), books such as those of Anwar highlight how anti-traditionalist critical theory has itself accumulated into an unwieldy epistemological tradition, and the enormous responsibility of a twenty-first century critic to incorporate it—one way or another—into his / her analyses. Starting, therefore, with the adjective of the problematic "Black" with a capital "B" put in revealingly self-effacing inverted commas, the alliterative "Dramatic Discourse" in the title of the book draws attention to itself first as a meta-linguistic exercise. Among critical conundrums

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that ensue from this meta-linguistics is the demonstration how over and beyond the truism of demolishing hegemonies encoded in traditional discourses, the reservations about setting up reactive hegemonies play a central role in postmodern critiques. So the critic-author's prefatory note becomes a befittingly lucid explanation about his adherence to the characteristically non-committal stance of contemporary polity.

The discussion in this book is not meant to draw any consensus about issues related to political, racial or gender-based differences. It is not also supposed to lead to conclusions about literary or theoretical viewpoints. But the intent definitely is to pave the way for looking beyond the historically employed margins of muteness" (Anwar, 2009, p. 9).

In such an argument, switching "marginalized positions" with "a centre space" (Anwar, p. 9) is of course not a self-sufficient activity; rather the focus shifts on how "the other" sides of black women's voicelessness split themselves up into a variety of meanings.

The other side of their silence refers to the extremely cavernous structures of historical repressions that frame the black women's dialogic exchange. It refers to the role of the mental interiors of black women that operate within the dialectic of their so-called spoken-silenced social identity. (Anwar, p. 10)

Context / A historical preview of 'silence' in western letters

Since interpretations of the psychosemiotic import of silence have undergone an enormously convoluted evolution in western letters, be it the disciplines of history, philosophy, psychology or any of the genres of literature, I would present a very brief glimpse of its changing facets down the ages before commenting on Anwar's writing style and issues addressed by him. Foremost among traditions related to it is the definitiveness with which silence was regarded as the attribute of a sage in Greco-Roman antiquity. Thus in one of Euripides' (5th Century BC/1974) plays, the chorus makes it an essential part of initiation into sublimity in its hymn to Artemis, invoking the deity's aid with the following chant: "Keep holy silence, all whose homes are here / Beside the Unfriendly Sea, / Beyond the Clashing Rocks" (p. 135). A few centuries later, Plutarch (1st Century AD/1913) propagated the virtues of silence in some of his most oft-quoted passages, among them the following from the essay entitled "Of Garrulousness" being a particularly typical illustration: "Silence, then, goes with depth, the capacity to keep a secret, and sobriety. Drunkenness, on the other hand, will be talking, for it means folly and witlessness, and therefore loquacity" (p. 134).

But this very vehement deification of silence, as is inevitably the case with every notion, also made room for satirical inversions. Shakespeare (1600/1976) was just one of the many who occasionally delved into possibilities of satirizing the gravity that conventionally went with it, in one of his darker comedies asserting that the "sort of men whose visages / Do cream and mantle like a standing pond," (p. 64) successfully disguise foolishness under a mask of wisdom, "If they should speak, would almost damn those ears, / Which, hearing them, would call their brothers fools" (p. 64). So already during the Renaissance the idea of silence being used as a mask contained

the seeds of corrosion that surfaced with the advent of modernistic skepticism, marking a concrete step towards newer, more interrogative interpretations of the concept.

However, it was with the Romantics, with their vehement negation of conservative classicist inhibitions, that the psychosemiotics of silence became essentially infused with ambivalence and the theory incorporated a complex dialectic within itself. While the Wordsworthian sublime was inexorably activated through a positive encroachment on “all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear . . .” (Wordsworth, 1798/1964, pp. 164—165), its view of “the language of the sense” (Wordsworth, p. 165) was made thoroughly ambivalent by being dove-tailed with metaphysical nourishment, what Wordsworth famously called the “soul / Of all my moral being” (Wordsworth, p. 165). Thomas Hood (1823/1956), in the same vein, while dismissing the physically blatant silence of the “cold grave” (p. 20) as superficial, located “true” and “self-conscious” (p. 20) silence in a ruined and ambivalently holistic landscape where “the dun fox or wild hyaena calls, / And owls, that flit continually between, / Shriek to the echo, and the low winds moan” (p. 20). Tennyson (1832/1964), while approving of the unambiguous silence possible only in death, introduced another kind of ambivalence when for his *Lotos-Eaters* it came to connote ultimate fulfillment through a triumph of peace over labour: “All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave / In silence . . .” (p. 308). Following this lead, many early modernists have also repeatedly highlighted paradoxes underlying discourses available through silences. For Hopkins (1918/1956), for example, silence is a coveted, paradoxically poetic hyper-language, “Elected silence, sing to me / . . . and be / The Music that I care to hear” (p. 2), while Frost’s (1916/1987) poem “The Oven Bird” treats a similar theme with a new twist, the oven bird sings loudly in midsummer but conveys its most significant message, unavoidable transience and decay, only after it stops singing and becomes silent: “The bird would cease and be as other birds / . . . / The question that he frames in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing” (p. 76).

Textual analysis

It is in this dynamic context of changing allusions and evocations that modern and postmodern approaches to silence should be evaluated. But what makes the historical context of Anwar’s study even more dense is that the overturning of traditional notions of representation have likewise played an important role in every significant twentieth century study of race, gender, and language in African American literature, thus giving Anwar’s *“Black” Women’s Dramatic Discourse* (2009) not one but two huge thought currents within which it may situate itself. The innumerable books and papers on African American drama make it daunting to even begin to take stock of the impact it has made on contemporary literature and criticism in general. But a beginner may have some idea of the significance and relevance of the subject matter of Anwar’s book from a comment made by Philip C. Kolin, editor of a critical reader on African American Women Dramatists. Kolin’s reader, published in 2007, preceded Anwar’s book by only two years, in which while introducing the plays of these dramatists, Kolin says, “These original, revolutionary most times, scripts have taken American theatre into one of its most powerful eras” (p. 2). This may implicitly indicate the demands of the vast critical canon that the author of another study of this kind is

automatically required to respond to, by first of all pursuing a sweeping range of preliminary readings. Anwar's bibliography evidences a fulfillment of this demand.

Critical theory, today a discipline in its own right, restricts criticism to university-based academic readership at least to some extent. Any reading of a book like Anwar's would be incomplete without a comprehensive awareness of the theoretical framework in which the plays by African American women dramatists are analyzed. This means that, given the range of the critics and theorists overtly referred to by Anwar, the ideal reading practice cannot avoid recognizing a junction of multiple frames of reference. This has far-reaching consequences. To illustrate the point, I would offer a close reading of the opening paragraph of the first part of the book's second chapter, which is quoted below:

My application of psychosemiotic theory to Marita Odette Bonner's play *The Purple Flower* foregrounds some details about black woman's silenced self during the Harlem Renaissance. Bonner was not a political figure, but her artistic ventures add a political tone to black woman's silence-speech dialectic during the Harlem Renaissance period. A psychosemiotic reading of *The Purple Flower* opens ways to analyze black women's privilege of transforming their dialogic hermeneutics into resistance, into an ability to do language differently. Within the traditional African, African-American, and European modes of representation the play reflects the true spirit of black women's alienation and rage, shaping their silence into a well-composed speaking subject position. (Anwar, 2009, p. 43)

The first sentence in the above quoted passage puts the debate in the concrete historical context of the Harlem Renaissance (of the pre-1945 era) but the ones that follow integrate this periodization of the issues into an essentially post-modern nature of the concepts at work in the background. So the paragraph as a whole seems to indirectly invoke the post-modernist debate about whether "[g]ood forms of representation" (Lucy, 2002, p. 25) are "historically and politically grounded" (Lucy, p. 25) or do without identity markers like history (Lucy, p. 26). A survey of the jargons that pose themselves against the idea of a dated world being analyzed in this passage is given below:

The "silence-speech dialectic" of the second sentence evokes Derrida's deconstructive methodology through an interplay of binaries that destabilizes the traditionally privileged status of speech—the principle of presence and activity—by letting silence—the principle of absence and passiveness—precede it, thus highlighting the absence of what Derrida would call "a transcendental signified" (Bressler, 1994, p. 79). Moreover, the "silence-speech dialectic" is used to activate another—that of politics and aesthetics—, which is itself a juxtaposition rich with multiple meanings for it brings into focus the fact that the dialectical phenomenology that once dealt with a complete whole and its parts is no longer valid. Instead, theorists like Deleuze have famously asserted that, in the post-modern thought, the "regulative totality is an illusion that serves only to provide cover for totalitarian terror and the reduction and exploitation of difference . . ." (Murphy, 2004, p. 87). In keeping with this spirit, silence, speech, the political and the aesthetic coexist in dialectical disunities in Anwar's analysis in "*Black*" *Women's Dramatic Discourse*.

The third sentence in the fore quoted passage, dealing with “dialogic hermeneutics” and doing “language differently,” obviously employs the jargon typical of the Bakhtinian school of criticism. More specifically, Bakhtin’s idea of chronotopes is invoked by the juxtaposition of dialogic hermeneutics and historicity since, as Bakhtin famously claimed, “some kind of correlation exists between the characteristic plots inside Greek romances and the world of experience outside those texts, if only because the literary text would lack any meaning were this not the case” (Holquist, 2001, p. 111).

And yet to proceed further, the fourth and the last sentence in Anwar’s passage, by talking of silence playing a definite role in shaping black women’s “well-composed speaking subject position,” encroaches on Foucault’s illuminating use of the dualistic interpretation of the term “subject position,” i.e., with reference to the idea of the subject of a sentence and the idea of subject as a verb, making individuals “occupy subject positions . . . only through a process in which they are “subjected” to power” (Leitch et al., 2001, p. 1617). At the same time, the point made here draws indirectly on the deep relationship studied by Lacan between the anatomy of language and the creation of “the subject of lack par excellence” (Stavrakakis, 2005, p. 25) since silence as a language takes absence rather than presence as its formative nucleus.

To add to the complexity of the discourse in the fore quoted paragraph, the phrase “black woman” is used four times, once in each sentence, and while the dialogic transformation is being talked about, it is actually shown to be enacted in the switch from the generic “black woman” of the first two sentences to the plurality of “black women” in the third and the fourth sentences, highlighting the contrast between a subject recorded metonymically and the subject that comparatively asserts her individuality within group representation. So the paragraph as a whole shows how a book of this kind, that deals with the diversity of “*Black Women’s Dramatic Discourse*,” binds a reader to many retrospective allusions, to the multiple and plural trends in literary and critical theory, sometimes taking this very exercise for granted until the reader is compelled into what may be called “reading backwards,” i.e., into academic gymnastics that treat the vast canon of critical theory as an indispensable preliminary stipulation.

The book “*Black Women’s Dramatic Discourse* (2009) deals with some concepts that may have a special appeal for Pakistani researchers as well as for Pakistani readership in general in redirecting focus on the ethic of the marginalized. One such instance figures in its interpretation of the racial symbolism of colours in Bonner’s play *The Purple Flower*, with brownness representing an ideological mediation between the essential binaries of the postcolonial dilemma. “Ideologically speaking,” says the author, the brown characters in the play are the backbone of the Us’s and their struggle for freedom. They avoid any extreme confrontational stance of white and black and remain most of the time in the background. Some of them are extremely marginalized or even silenced” (Anwar, 2009, p. 52).

The full significance of such an interpretation may not be as readily apparent to a western as to an Asian reader since it involves the multiplicity visible within one facet of postcolonialism: the need of redefining the privileging of the marginalized (black) at the expense of the dominant (white) until it incorporates two distinct entities (black & brown), or, so to speak, two brands of

the oppressed, within the categories of the oppressed. The book therefore demonstrates how with an ever-increasing number of eastern immigrants and inter-racial marriages in the west today, contemporary social theories necessarily have to absorb an endless number of conceptual subdivisions.

A very important point about Anwar's writing style in *"Black" Women's Dramatic Discourse* (2009) has to do with the incorporation of repetitions, synonymic expressions, or collocations in a single sentence—e.g., “. . . monologues, ellipses, gaps, spaces, settings, or places . . .” (Anwar, p. 11). This style has both a positive and a negative side and since the range of its impact is diverse, different examples have to be looked at differently: sometimes it undesirably burdens the reader's mind but at other times becomes the very device to highlight the sensitive difference between two very similar critical points.

Here, for example, is a sentence structure that becomes muddled with unnecessary repetitions: “It excavates the cultural and canonical absence of the black cultural matrix and silences related to it in terms of “black” invisibility from the white Western academic circles for a long period” (Anwar, 2009, p. 20). In this case, the black culture may obviously have been referred to in a far concise manner. In other sentences, synonyms may tend to appear redundant, serving only a rhetorical purpose: “The play exhibits the controversial conflict between revolutionary radical and moderate assimilation attitudes” (Anwar, 2009, p. 46). The irreconcilable dilemma of a researcher's quest for exactitude of diction and a literary critic's lure of rhetoric is foregrounded by phrases like “controversial conflict” or “revolutionary radical.”

However, at other places these lists of synonyms actually function as devices for critical nuances. Here is a good example: “The dramatization of Sarah's state of mind, her indistinct living of I or/and she/he figures, represents invisible divisions, boundaries, and margins and their blurring intersection through props, signs, speeches and silences on the stage” (Anwar, 2009, p. 83). Whereas, in this sentence, divisions, boundaries, and margins may have been reduced to a single word, some of the required meaning would have been lost. While Anwar is commenting on the plurality of split representations, in a sense that plurality is vividly performed by the multi-faceted view of the dilemma conveyed with the use of three words instead of one. Similarly, while, strictly speaking, props, speeches, and silences are hyponyms of signs in the jargon of the theatre, the insertion of all of these words instead of only “signs” draw attention to an essentially multi-faceted interpretation of signs, the need to categorize and sub-categorize them for the sake of a more microscopic look at them.

Another example of the same kind figures only a few lines later on the same page: “Her blackness, invisibility, anonymity, nothingness, suicide, absence and silence in *Funny house* measure the depth and crisis of the black woman's tragic existence in the funny jungle of postmodern Euro-American civilization” (Anwar, 2009, p. 83). Here the list of synonyms that identify utter passiveness is serving the purpose of illustrating how the semantic connection between them cannot be always taken for granted. That things have fallen together in this particular character does not signify any permanent coexistence of the concepts invoked here. Silence, as has been mentioned before, does not always suggest nothingness; sometimes it suggests exactly the

opposite. Invisibility, anonymity and nothingness are similarly not absolute collocations of blackness but generate their meanings differently in a particular context. Hence the need to mention all of these words instead of only one or two.

Yet another very thought provoking example in this regard figures a few pages earlier: “The surreal and hyper-real collaborations of Kennedy’s masquerading and Shange exploding in their plays in terms of pastiche, collage, choreography, and narrative-drama or dialogic monologues shatter the silences behind the gender-race-class matrix” (Anwar, 2009, p. 78). The first three items in the list—i.e., pastiche, collage, choreography—may sometimes substitute each other but once again this is not an absolute given and so the use of all these words technically does not denote redundancy. The last two items are unique because they demand a special attention on punctuation and conjunctions. The commas break the list down into four sections but and/or connectors show that the last two techniques, both constituted of multiple lexemes, are meant to be synonyms completely interchangeable with each other. The interpretation of how that happens is made all the more difficult by the fact that both are oxymorons, pressing within themselves apparently contradictory meanings. But it is difficult to judge whether narrative-drama or dialogic monologues are always brought into play simultaneously.

This last point incidentally also highlights another very characteristic feature of the writing style of “*Black Women’s Dramatic Discourse*: the use of hyphens to hint at the exact kind of juxtaposition of concepts aimed at by the author. Syntactic parallelism is here sacrificed since whereas narrative-drama, as a compound word, is treated as a literary term, dialogic monologues obviously evoke a comparatively more contrived grouping together of two concepts.

The following sentence is a classic example of how deeply hyphens can have an impact on shaping meaning, “Like a postmodern black female Shakespeare, Shange free-floats her inter-genre experiments to allow multiple options, opinions, and opportunities for the inclusive-exclusive interpretation of her performance-ensembles” (Anwar, 2009, p. 111). Over and above the remarkable musicality of “options, opinions and opportunities,” the sentence enfolds an equally remarkable semantic compression in its four compound words, and it is only gradually that the reader may make sense of the whole of it. In a sentence that talks of black characters’ quest for knowing “the blackness and hidden-ness of their racial and gendered selves . . .” (Anwar, p. 111), it appears that the author is making a point about the psyche of the concerned characters by putting their fractured hidden-ness beside the wholeness of their blackness.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that appreciation of plural, ambivalent, and deferred meanings is the logical objective of critical texts that make one skeptical of allotting absolute values to components of dualisms, as could be illustrated by the following observation of one critic of black drama:

What the “perpetual questioning” subverts is the *culturalist* notion of difference that animates *both* the Eurocentric and Afrocentric discourses—the fixation of one upon white = civilized—black = barbaric opposition and of the other on a “white aesthetic” against a “black

aesthetic”—and the more or less quiet disregard by both for the complexity of the enabling conditions of their utterances. The post-Afrocentric discourse not only quests for different representations but also, simultaneously, queries the *representation of difference*. (Olaniyan, 1995, p. 27).

To conclude, one may say that one of Anwar’s comments on the African American women dramatists studied by him may effectively pass as a summation of his own book; his analysis bringing one “a semantic enrichment that grows dialogically complicated, monologically intricate, but effectively intriguing” (Anwar, 2009, p. 11).

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