A Metalinguistic Approach to *The Color Purple*

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**Abstract.** *The Color Purple*, written by Alice Walker, is a Pulitzer Prize winning novel. It earns its fame in the critic circle for the terrifying plot, the controversial treatment of the lesbian affairs between the heroines, and the exposure of the crimes done to the black females. The current paper attempts to analyze the novel from metalinguistic/translinguistic perspective. The novel is analyzed on the level of discourse, which includes unidirectional double-voiced discourse, vari-directional double-voiced discourse, and active type of reflected discourse of another, which is called “microdialogue” in Bakhtin’s terms. Through the analysis of the discourse in the novel, it can be concluded that the novel is dialogic in nature. In this sense, dialogue becomes a means for human life and human existence.

**Introduction**

Bakhtin’s theories focus primarily on the concept of dialogism, which brings with it a different point of view, a different way of seeing the world, and on the notion that language—any form of speech or writing—is always a dialogue and all human communication is dialogic. In this respect, it can be found at least three distinct senses of the term dialogue: dialogue as a global concept, as a view of truth and the world; dialogue as a general concept applicable to every utterance; and dialogue as a specific concept that distinguishes dialogic discourse from monologic discourse. Dialogue is primarily the basic model of language as discursive communication, which manifests the relationship of agreement or disagreement, the relationship of affirmation and reinforcement, and the relationship of asking and answering.

The whole novel is written in epistolary form, consisting of 90 letters from Celie and Nettie. Such a form is important for several reasons. First, it allows an uneducated, black woman to speak for herself. Celie writes her letters in Black English, which is a conspicuous linguistic feature of the novel standing in contrast to the Standard English in the novel. Second, by using the epistolary form, the author actually creates a dialogue between the letter-writer and the letter-reader. Another conspicuous feature of the novel is that the reported discourses in the novel are free direct discourses, so two voices—the speaker’s and the author’s voice—can be found in a single discourse. Two voices in a discourse are called double-voicedness in Bakhtin’s terms.

**Theoretical Basis**

Bakhtin’s theories focus primarily on the concept of dialogism, which brings with it a different point of view, a different way of seeing the world, and on the notion that language—any form of speech or writing—is always a dialogue and all human communication is dialogic. In this respect, it can be found at least three distinct senses of the term dialogue: dialogue as a global concept, as a view of truth and the world; dialogue as a general concept applicable to every utterance; and dialogue as a specific concept that distinguishes dialogic discourse from monologic discourse. Dialogue is primarily the basic model of language as discursive communication, which manifests the relationship of agreement or disagreement, the relationship of affirmation and reinforcement, and the relationship of asking and answering.

Dialogism is used by Bakhtin to make contrast to monologism, and dialogue is primarily the basic model of language as discursive communication. Dialogism, dialogue or dialogical principle (Bakhtin, 1989), which means double-voicedness or multi-voicedness. Dialogism manifests the relationship of agreement or disagreement, the relationship of affirmation and reinforcement, and
the relationship of asking and answering (Bakhtin, 1989). One of the classical definitions of
dialogue comes from his study of Dostoevsky: “Everything that seemed simple became, in his
world, complex and multi-structured. In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every
expression a crack and the readiness to go over immediately to another contradictory expression; in
every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the
profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguities, of every phenomenon.” (Bakhtin, 1989: 30)

In dialogical theory, each voice speaks in anticipation (often with misguided and misled
presuppositions) of the answering voice of another. People’s discourses are thereby permeated with
the voices of others. The other plays the role of not a passive listener, nor a receiver of a
ready-made message, but rather as a co-participant simultaneously creating and created by the
discourse. Unidirectional double-voiced discourse is the kind of discourse that is directed toward
one orientation, i.e., the author speaks in someone else’s discourse, and “[…] does not collide with
the other’s thought, but rather follows after it in the same direction, merely making that direction
conventional” (Bakhtin, 1989:193). It has four varieties: (1) stylization; (2) narrator’s narration; (3)
unobjectified discourse of a character who carries out (in part) the author’s intentions; and (4)
Ich-Erzählung (Bakhtin, 1989). I will explain the four varieties respectively.

Analysis of The Color Purple

The novel is comprised of 90 letters, among which 68 are from Celie, 22 from Nettie, from which
representative examples are analyzed in light of Bakhtin’s dialogic theory. The reasons for utilizing
Bakhtin’s dialogic idea as the theoretical basis of the current thesis are: (1) In The Color Purple, there
are two narrators to tell the story by writing letters. This epistolary form of writing style makes it
possible for the letter-writer and letter-reader to participate in dialogue with each other. This
corresponds to Bakhtin’s dialogism. (2) The reported discourses in the novel are mostly in the form of
free direct discourse, so that the language of the novel is full of dialogues between the characters. Also,
within the narrators’ narrative discourses, two voices or intentions can be found: the author or
narrator’s voice or intention and other characters’ voices or intentions. And the discourses in the novel
are double-voiced and dialogic in nature. These double-voiced discourses are further classified into
three types: unidirectional double-voiced discourse, vari-directional double-voiced discourse, and the
active type of reflected discourse of another. In the following part, I will analyze the representative
discourse of the novel from the perspective of the three types of discourse.

Unidirectional Double-Voiced Discourse in The Color Purple

In The Color Purple, the unidirectional double-voiced discourse is realized mainly through the
employment of stylization and narrator’s narration. As an epistolary novel, The Color Purple
stylizes a narrative technique of the eighteenth-century epistolary novels of sentiment. As an
epistolary novel, The Color Purple stylizes a narrative technique of the eighteenth-century
epistolary novels of sentiment. In the traditional epistolary form of sentiment, there is always a
knight who comes and saves the beautiful heroine in distress. Significantly, in adopting the
epistolary form, Alice Walker borrows certain codes and conventions of this form: Walker’s heroine
is also a victim of sexual and other forms of abuses, but she recovers in the end in a happy salvage
by her former abuser—her stepfather, from whom she gets her heritage after his death. However, in
contrast with the traditional epistolary form, in The Color Purple, the “knight”—Mr. ___ — turns out
to be an abusive husband, not the savior of the heroine Celie. Instead, Celie comes to her rescue with
the help of other women, not the “noble” man.

By ironically stylizing the epistolary conventions of sentiment, Walker colorizes her novel with
double-voicedness. Like the style of epistolary form, there is also a predetermined letter-receiver and
letter-writer in the novel. But it is not taken merely as a common epistolary form; rather, it is a
stylization by Alice Walker to serve her new purposes of making her novel double-voiced and
dialogic. Also, by stylizing the epistolary form, Walker is able to link a formal and Western
language tradition to an oral and distinctively African American folk expression. Walker’s stylized
use of the Black English has added to the old and static epistolary form with freshness.
Positing a storyteller to narrate the story of a novel is important in that it makes the discourse of the novel permeated with double-voicedness, for in the narrator’s narration, there is the narrator’s voice and also the author’s voice and the author’s discourse is replaced by the discourse of the narrator. In addition, the storyteller is regarded as a carrier of a “particular verbal-ideological linguistic belief system, with a particular point of view on the world and its events, with particular value judgments and intonations (Bakhtin, 2002: 312). There is a distance between the discourse of the real author of the novel and the discourse of a narrator. In contrast to the direct discourse of the author, the narrator’s discourse is always taken as another’s discourse, through which the author’s intention can be refracted.

The function of the stylized narrators in the novel is to tell their stories with their own words, embodying two speaking styles due to their living in different social environments. Celie, an uneducated black woman, suppressed and silenced by both the white and the black men, uses her uneducated and unpolished language to narrate her story. For example: “Don’t nobody come see us” (Walker, 1989: 12). In this example, “don’t” and “nobody” appear simultaneously in a discourse, which is typical of Black English. Likely, “By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold” (Walker, 1989: 12). In this example, “git” should be “get” and “be” should be “is”. These are also typical features of Black English. While Nettie, having a relatively better life comparing with here sister Celie, described for us a completely different living experience with an educated and polished Standard English. For instance, “Well, we had two weeks of study in the Olinka dialect, which the people in this region speak” (Walker, 1989: 127). Comparing with Celie’s ungrammatical discourse, Nettie’s discourse is close to literary style.

Similarity between these two narrators is that they are used to make the discourse of the novel dialogic; therefore, their worldviews, evaluations, analyses and judgments coexist with the author’s worldview, evaluation, and judgment. In their discourses, their intentions, although may not be the same as the author’s, are not opposed to or clashed with the author. Consequently, not only the narrator’s voice but also the author’s voice can be heard in the narrator’s discourse. However, their voices neither contend nor merge with each other, but direct to the same orientation. Alice Walker does not merely display her two narrators’ discourse, but utilizes them from within for her own purposes of distancing herself from that of the narrators. Walker’s voice does not cover the narrators’ voice, though the presence of her voice can be traced in the narrators’ narration. Significantly, the author’s voice is heard through the refraction of her narrators’ voice in the whole novel.

**Vari-Directional Double-Voiced Discourse in The Color Purple**

Vari-directional double-voiced discourse, as its name has indicated, has at least two voices in a single discourse, and the intentions of the two voices are directed into two different orientations, hostile to each other. The two voices, two semantic intentions appear within the same discourse and allow intention and counter-intention to emerge within a single statement and collide in a suspended moment of indecision which leaves the discourse “internally undecided and two-faced” (Bakhtin, 1989: 198). In *The Color Purple*, the two narrators tell the story in their own speech, in addition, there are other characters’ speeches that appear in the form of free direct discourse in their narration. In these discourses, if the narrator’s intention is directed to the same orientation with that of a speaker in the novel, it is unidirectional double-voiced discourse. But if the narrator’s intention and the speaker’s intention are in an opposite direction and hostile to each other; it is the vari-directional double-voiced discourse, which is the focus of this section. In the novel, parody and transmission of someone else’s words with a shift in accent are discussed and illustrated separately with examples from the novel.

**The Active Type of Reflected Discourse of Another**

All the discourses by the narrators in the novel have some similarities in that they are written in the context of epistolary form, in which there is a letter-writer and a letter-reader. In the epistolary form, letters between the letter-writer and letter-reader is like rejoinders between them. The letter-writer or the narrator of the novel always takes other’s possible reaction into consideration. In their discourse, there are two voices: the visible speaker’s voice either argues with the invisible other’s voice, or answers and predicts the other’s possible response.
In contrast to the previously discussed passive types of discourses—the unidirectional double-voiced discourse and vari-directional double-voiced discourse, in an active type of reflected discourse of another, the other’s words have an active influence on the speaker’s or author’s discourse, although this other’s discourse never appears in the speaker’s discourse, it poses a sideward glance at someone else’s word and discourse that is in the form of hidden dialogue in the novel. In the discourse with a sideward glance at someone else’s words, the speaker of the discourse always takes other’s potential response into his/her consideration, then answers or refutes with that response. For hidden dialogue, there is an invisible other who influences the speaker of the discourse from without, and the speaker responds to the influence as if he/she were in dialogue with the hidden other.

Significantly, there exists the kind of discourse with a sideward glance at someone else’s word in the novel. For the reason that The Color Purple employs the epistolary form, whose characteristic feature is that the letter writer is actually aware of his/her interlocutor or addressee to whom the letter is directed, so the discourse always takes a sideward glance at the letter-reader’s reaction. “The letter, like a rejoinder in a dialogue, is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account the other’s possible reactions, the other’s possible reply. This reckoning with an absent interlocutor can be more or less intensive” (Bakhtin, 1989: 205). In the novel, one of the two narrators, Celie, takes a sideward glance at someone else’s discourse, defending for herself or debating with others. Celie at first writes to God, then to her sister Nettie, so every letter has its own predetermined reader, which indicates that Celie has predicted the possible response form either God or Nettie. Consequently, it seems that she always imagines how the receiver will respond to her story and her discourse. For the reason that Celie is her letters’ sole reader, Nettie wants to share with Celie her experiences and feelings. She always bears in mind Celie’s possible response to her story, her discourse, therefore, is full of anticipation for other’s questions and responses.

In hidden dialogue, there appears only one speaker’s discourse, while the second speaker’s discourse is omitted from the dialogue. However, the second speaker’s invisible discourse can be felt by the first speaker, and can exert a determining influence on the discourse of the first speaker. It is as if a real dialogue took place between the two speakers, although there is neither a second speaker nor a second discourse (Bakhtin, 1989). Thereby, hidden dialogue is the double-voiced and dialogic discourse.

**Conclusion**

Being an activist of women’s movement, anti-racism movement and other movements for humane causes, Alice Walker explicitly fights against discriminations toward women, toward the black, or toward any weak and minorities, in addition, she strongly advocates the possibility of dialogue between male and female, between black and white, between all the human beings, instead of dominance or silence on any side. As far as the whole novel is concerned, there are three primary elements in The Color Purple that are unfamiliar to us. The first is its epistolary form, which makes it remarkable and full of dialogues between letter-writer and letter-reader. The second unfamiliar element in the novel is Walker’s deliberate use of free direct discourse in her novel, which, as a result, makes the discourses in her novel double-voiced. In these double-voiced discourses, the voice of the speaker and also the voice of the author can be heard simultaneously. There is no ceasing of these two voices and intentions. Dialogue, in its narrow sense, is the rejoinders between characters in the novel, represented in the form of double-voiced discourses of the novel. In The Color Purple, dialogic relationships exist everywhere. Because of Walker’s use of layered narrative line, Walker’s text has the characteristics of the form of double-voicedness. Actually, the more a novel relies on dialogism, the more it foregrounds different voices. Each “voice” is a manifestation of a particular ideology, or a certain attitude towards somebody or something. In dialogue, many voices (of individuals, discourses, cultures etc.) are heard mingling, contending and reflecting with one another. All these voices appear in many different mutual relations, which are double-voiced, and dialogic. And it is this double-voicedness of The Color Purple that gives its characters an opportunity to speak for themselves, and contend with one another. The double-voicedness may
appear in a discourse, representing different intentions of the speaker and the narrator, making the discourse dialogic.

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References: