

‘The Dialectic of Storytelling’ in John Edgar Wideman’s *Hiding Place*

Evangeline Sweety

Research Scholar

Fatima College

Madurai

Abstract

*African Americans were a people who suffered greatest denial in the history of human kind. Forcefully extricated from their motherland- Africa, they had to sever their ties with anything related to the African culture in order to survive in the New World. They were exploited as slaves and indentured laborers by their condescending white masters who abused them physically, and psychologically. The traumatic scars and the insidious stereotypes they acquired from slavery are indelible to this very day. They still suffer racism beneath the master narratives of advancement, freedom and equality. This paper attempts to etch their attempts to examine the oral storytelling traditions of their ancestors in West Africa, which help them survive their difficult situations in the present. John Edgar Wideman is a contemporary African American writer who believed that storytelling interlocks one’s own history with the community’s and that it’s a unique way by which the descendants can refer back to their cultural memory for strength and endurance. In his *Hiding Place* (1981), Mother Bess takes up the role of an African griot in helping Tommy survive his estrangement from family and society.*

Key words: *Art of storytelling, oratures, racism, John Edgar Wideman, Hiding Place.*

Introduction:

African Americans believed in the power of a spoken word as all their folk tales, songs, wisdom, and spirituality were transmitted from one generation to the other by means of word of mouth. Africa was a nation of dancers, singers and storytellers. Storytelling particularly was a breath of life for them as it was a part and parcel of their existence. Griot was the storyteller in the West African tradition and was held in high esteem as she or he was supposed to be the keeper and transmitter of lore and tradition. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o explains in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) about how Africans enjoyed sitting around the fireside listening to stories told to them by grown-ups. The next day the children repeated them to their friends while working in the fields. Repetition with difference for them was a mark of superiority as they never repeated the stories in the exact same way. Each time a story is repeated it always felt refreshing and new.

A good story teller creatively improved the stories every time by using different words, images, and inflexion of voices. Thus language for Africans were “not a mere string of words” (Thiong’o 80) but had a “suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning.”(Thiong’o 80). Oratures evolved as the storytellers never memorized their stories. The Africans loved the music of their language as it had a beauty of its own.

But, when African slaves were extricated from their motherland to the New World, they were forced to give up their vernacular, customs and denied access to written text. They were denied the basic right to education and had to use the ‘King’s English’ to communicate. This led them to use the remnants of their tribal past namely the tradition of storytelling to express themselves. It is this tradition, the means of communication of the African tribes, which strengthened the mode of resistance and creativity within the African American Literary tradition. By the nineteenth century, authors were fully aware that print literacy can lead them to freedom and the act of writing particularly became a “political gesture” (Gates 171). They strove to write themselves out of slavery and oppression.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston was the first book to celebrate oral tradition central to the African American culture. Gates calls it the first “speakerly text” of African American literature as its infused with a dialectic of storytelling, signifying, sounding, declamation contests, preaching and song which enhance a realistic portrayal of communities and characters. (Gates 174). By making a printed book speak in a black oral voice, Hurston and subsequent writers like Ishmael Reed and Alice Walker succeeded where the eighteenth century slave narrators failed. African American writers pose as oral storytellers and not as writers. They imagine their readers as listeners. They do this to appreciate more responsible reading. Called as the ‘call and response’, the oral dynamics of antiphony employed by the authors help the readers to actively participate in the understanding of the text.

John Edgar Wideman attempts a kind of fiction which according to Robert Scholes has “less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative; more shapely, more evocative; more concerned with ideas and ideals and less concerned with things” (12). In his introduction to *Best American Short Stories 1996*, John Edgar Wideman wrote that “stories that mount a challenge to our everyday conventions and assumptions stir my blood. Not only because they are exciting formally and philosophical, but because they retain for fiction its subversive, radically democratic role” (Baker, Lisa 263). Wideman presents different stories to problematize the allegedly true stories of blackness which had been fabricated by the westerners based on racism—a purely constructed concept. In the African American context, folklore and stories of the African tradition are used as powerful tools to project the resilience and endurance of their ancestors in harsh world and to instill strength for the present generation.

Discussion:

Hiding Place (1981) is John Edgar Wideman’s second novel of *The Homewood Trilogy* which presents the events of a few days during which Tommy hides in the deserted rickety shack of Bess atop Bruston Hill. Tommy is the great great great grandson of Sybella Owens who commits a robbery during the course of which a man is murdered. Though Tommy is innocent of

the crime, he flees fearing the cops would first shoot and then ask questions. Bess, called “evil and crazy” (39) by everybody, and related to Tommy, had been living as a hermit on Bruston Hill after the deaths of her husband and her son. Both the characters suffer isolation at various levels as they are separated from their families and therefore their community; but their association with each other leave them reassured. The significance of history, family and culture are powerfully presented in *Hiding Place* through Mother Bess as she becomes the griot who weaves out the family history and lineage to Tommy.

The outset of the novel presents Bess as someone who has lost her faith in God, world, everything and even storytelling. She has been staying alone at the Bruston Hill as a recluse awaiting her own death. Though the faces of her family members had always occupied the gallery of her mind and her thinking, she doesn’t want to remember any of them as she has severed all family ties. Thus, when Tommy comes seeking her help, she refuses in a harsh manner: “Can’t have you here....Go back where you came from and leave me be”. (34).

All his twenty five years, Tommy had been a “no good just like they been telling him all the days of his life.” (42). He had grown up in Homewood during the 1960s, the turbulent times and was disillusioned, fragmented to the extent that he wastes his life on dope and lived the hip life. That was a time when the African Americans were denied access to good-housing, high quality education, employment and basic amenities. Tommy had led rebellions in his college for the cause of African Americans’ betterment, and he didn’t take studies seriously. Becoming a victim of unemployment and poverty, he has deservedly lost his wife and son as he has not been able to provide for them as a responsible husband and a father.

Though Bess sends him away, Tommy reclines in the shed behind Bess’ shack but early the next morning, she sees “his long feet poking from the corner of the shed” (44). She unconsciously sets about trying to connect herself with Tommy and figures out that he is “her long-dead sister’s great-grandson” (44). At once she remembers all her family members. Tommy’s presence reminded her of the funeral service of baby Kaleesha where she had seen Tommy: “He was moving away from the others as fast as those stiff shoulders of that man’s suit and grave dust all over his shoes would let him.” (54). Bess realizes that Tommy, just like her, has been isolating himself from families.

All the communal stories dormant in her, take full form and become productive after she meets Tommy. Mother Bess pulls out Tommy by his feet with the intention of sending him away but offers him some soup. Though she poses herself as very reserved and aloof, she ultimately succumbs to telling stories:

I’ma feed you cause you my sister Gert’s great-grand-son. Cause I seen your mama, Lizabeth, the minute after she born. Prayed for you and your brothers and sister each time I heard Lizabeth had a baby on the way... I was hoping for the best for all youall because your mama Lizabeth was my sister’s grandchild. So I’ma feed you and get you out of here as soon as it’s dark but I don’t want to hear none your troubles. (73)

The silence at Bess's shack reminds him of how peaceful and quiet those days of past mentioned in stories he had heard from Aunt Aida used to be: "Once upon a time, Once upon a time, he thought, if them stories I been hearing all my life are true, once upon a time they said God's green earth was peaceful and quiet." (79) The stillness of those stories takes him to another place in the middle of the night when he had made love with his wife Sarah when everything was good and peaceful. Suddenly he realizes the turn of events and "swallows hard in the stillness" (79). Things are not the same as before. He is nothing now. He is alone and lonely. He feels the need to pour out his angst to someone. Though Bess reprimands him for trying to have a conversation with her, Tommy tells her his trouble:

Told you I'm in real trouble... there's a man dead man down there and the police after me because they think I did it. I'm running for my life and I'm scared. (81)

He tells her how far he has run to escape from the effects of a crime he hadn't committed. Bess could not help but empathize with Tommy and goes on weaving out his family genealogy and particularly the miraculous birth of his mother as she saw it. She does this to give him a feeling of comfort; to remind him that he belongs to a community of resilience and strength. Bess confides:

You Lizabeth's son, Thomas. Your grandmother was my sister's girl. ...Freeda was the oldest... John French your granddaddy.... I was there when your mama Lizabeth first seen the light of the day. Lizabeth was Freeda's first. Came out blue as the shirt you're wearing...May grabbed her up...and runned out the front door...stuck that poor little naked thing down in a pile of snow and don't you know that blue child started to breathe...That's your mama. And I know just who you are too. (82)

Though he had heard about this during his childhood from Aunt Aida, Mother Bess retelling the story of his mother's survival is crucial at this point of time as Tommy is hopeless and the story gives him strength. Bess tells him that "Life's hard" to which he says, "Been told lots of things. But nobody got to tell me it's hard" (83). The stories told by Aunt Aida were etched in his psyche that he dreams about those stories to feel comforted. But he failed to actualize the positivity of those stories in his reality and create a better life for his family. Bess tells the same story but enlightens him in a different way that life isn't that easy.

Bess realizes her role as a griot and supports him as any of the eldest family members would. She makes hot coffee mixed with whiskey to warm his blood and offers her own blanket to keep him warm. Bess' rigidity mellows down. Bess tells Tommy that one day she was visited by Shirley, Tommy's sister who carried her baby Kaleesha all the way up during a summertime. Mother Bess knew that Shirl "had brought the pretty eyed baby for Mother Bess to touch... with the power they believed she had because she was old and evil and crazy up there by herself on top of Bruston Hill. Because she lived with the dead. Because she was dead herself." (154). African Americans believed that the ancestors lived with them even after their deaths; that they

had supernatural powers that could drive away the troubles they were facing. As Bess had secluded herself and had been living like an ancient slave or an ancestor that people were sure she was vested with some magical powers.

Bess narrates to Tommy as to how Shirl had sat at the same place he is sitting now and how she had cried as the doctors had given up on her baby. Bess conveys to Tommy that she was the prettiest baby she had ever laid her eyes on. The baby's eyes were "the brightest, and blackest and prettiest" (130). Bess had hoped the girl had survived. But her death shattered Bess and pushed her further into desolation as those black eyes kept following Bess. She says to Tommy:

Scared rabbits in your eyes and why you got to be sitting there where she sat with that poor little pretty-eyed thing. I bet there was some of that pretty in your eyes once...so you mize well go on back to sleep. You been hit upside the head?... did somebody take a brick to your head cause I swear you got the sleeping sickness. You ain't done nothing but sleep since you been here. Standing up, lying down, sitting in a chair don't make no difference you sleeping. (133)

It had been three days with Mother Bess and she had forced him out of his sleep and taught him how to plant seeds. Tommy feels rejuvenated and decides to leave his hiding place. He says, "I ain't worried bout the cops no more... Well, I ain't worried bout nothing no more" (148). Bess appreciates his courage and tries to get him on the right track by advising him not to get into any more trouble:

Robbing folks and messing with that dope and killing people so people trying to kill you. What kind of life is that?... Didn't have to be that way. Everybody down there ain't like that. You got a brother done alright for hisself...plenty people down there ain't got squat but they ain't stealing and robbing. They ain't outlaws. (149).

Tommy is determined to face his fear as a result of the beautiful conversations he had with Bess. He says: "I been scared all my life. But I ain't killed nobody let them find me and kill me if they can but I know who I am and know what I did, and I'm ready to live now.... do the best I can cause I ain't scared." (151). After Tommy leaves, Bess hears sirens whining down below the city and police cars rumbling up the hill. Bess feels helpless now to save Tommy. But, she decides to abandon the shack and come out of her own hiding, "Because somebody has to go down there and tell the truth. Lizabeth's boy didn't kill nobody. He wasn't scared. All he needed was another chance and somebody needs to go down there and tell them.... That he staked his life on one more chance." (158).

Summation:

Stories are storehouses of memory, traditions, folklore from ages back that they carried on from generation to generation. They had a powerful mythical quality about them that one cannot deny. African Americans understand them as they can relate to the incidents told in stories and obtain a sort of strength to endure their very present troubles like how their ancestors faced. Tommy obtains such strength from the stories of his community and his family narrated by Mother Bess who acts as a griot instilling endurance and driving away Tommy's fear. Stories told by her reminds her of her own lineage and ultimately draws her out of her isolation to carry on the tradition and the art of storytelling.

Works Cited:

- Baker, Lisa. "Storytelling and Democracy (in the Radical Sense): A Conversation with John Edgar Wideman." *African American Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2000, pp. 263–272.
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Scholes, Robert. *The Fabulators*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967
- Thiong'o Ngugi Wa. "From Decolonizing the Mind". *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*. Ed. John Thieme. New York: Arnold, 1996, pp 79-83.
- Wideman, John Edgar. *Hiding Place*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.