

# [Voice in the poisonwood bible](https://assignbuster.com/voice-in-the-poisonwood-bible/)

The use of one’s voice is one of the most powerful weapons humans possess. Yet, too often it is not used to its full potential, and rather, is overlooked, used to harm, or silenced altogether. Voices are shaped over many years and experiences, and they evolve throughout a lifetime. Each individual possesses a voice unique and exclusive to himself or herself, and this expression of self can never be taken away unless one allows it to be. In her novel, The Poisonwood Bible, Barbara Kingsovler investigates this idea of voice by writing a story told through the point of view of five different women. Through the lens of Orleanna, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May, the reader is able to better understand the intense, complex situation of the Congo at this time because it is presented through five different view points. When the same story is told and retold with different perspectives and filters, the reader is able to truly grasp the entire picture. Kingsolver’s use and exploration of the technique of voice in The Poisonwood Bible enables her to create a complex novel with many layers, as her characters and their voices evolve throughout their time in the Congo and beyond.

Rather than writing the novel in third person or a singular first person narrative, “ the [five person] narrative point of view creates a field of reciprocal subjects, all crucial to the story but none exclusive or central. The heart of the novel emerges only by stacking multiple renditions and discerning the similarities and differences that together shape the broader view” (Ognibene 21). Kingsolver offers us not just the same story told through five different women, but also, the same story told through five women with drastically different world, political, and religious views. The five women’s “ revelatory narrative circle” also offers a “ feminist alternative to historical writing,” which, as Austenfeld indicates, is usually male dominated (294). When asked why she troubled herself with writing five different viewpoints, Kingsolver herself said “ because it was necessary to the theme of the novel” (Author Interview). At its essence, the novel is a political allegory, and Kingsolver goes on to say that she wanted to analyze the entire spectrum of attitudes to the same political situation from “ Orleanna’s paralyzing guilt to Rachel’s blithe ‘ What , me worry?’” (Some Previous). Because each narrative is slanted to the narrator speaking, the reader is able to fully understand a conflict he or she is not a part of. This technique also provides a more humanistic approach to understanding a political situation that is usually portrayed through TV screens and the nightly news, rather than a family in the midst of it.

Kingsolver’s novel is also intricate because she uses five different female voices, yet, within a few chapters, the reader is quickly able to distinguish the speaker and tell them apart. Kingsolver says that this was one of the greatest challenges she faced and says she “ spent almost a year just honing the different voices” (Author Interview). This is evident throughout the novel as the reader differentiates between each of the distinct narrators. Rachel’s voice is one of a teenager, thrust into a life she did not ask for in the middle of the turbulent Congo. She is concerned with “ Sweet Sixteens” and her hair rather than the dangerous, complicated world she is now living in. In this sense, she “ best represents America’s material culture” (Ognibene 31). Although she seems far removed from her situation (often because of her own doing), Rachel is incredibly perceptive and she “ renders human relationships, material details, conversations, and emotions with great accuracy” (Austenfeld 295). As Elaine Ognibene succinctly writes, “ Rachel sees the truth about things that concern her” (31). Yet, she often mixes up her words, speaking in malapropisms, which John Mullan comments is a result of her “ prissiness” (12).

Similar to her elder sister in her penchant for honesty, the youngest sister Ruth May offers an unfiltered view of the world around her. Ruth May’s naïve understanding of her family’s situation is representative of the average American’s attempts to fathom the circumstances they are witnessing from afar. She regurgitates all that she absorbs and the reader is offered a “ broad sample of all she sees, hears, smells, dreams, and feels” (Austenfeld 296). 2 Although her voice may seem small or insignificant compared to the others’, Ruth May’s accounts offer a much needed positive and childish relief from the harsh world the others are living in. As Ruth May focuses on playing with the other children and enjoying her five-year old self, the reader develops a fondness for her and is just as drastically impacted as the four other women in the novel when she is cruelly taken from the world.

The two more in-depth and intellectual accounts of the Congo come from the twins, Leah and Adah. From their relationship—or attempts at a relationship—with their father to their physical appearance, these twins could not be more opposite. Leah is desperate for all types of knowledge and seeks it out wherever she can find it. Leah is a quick and avid learner and often “ presents historical and cultural details and describes relationships and emotional connections” (Austenfeld 295-296). Soaked in the Bible teachings of her father that she desperately wants to obey, Leah’s accounts “ combine biblical cadence with ready clichés” (Mullan 12). Leah is also the only one of the Price family members who uses her voice to learn and speak the Kikango language and connect with the villagers there. On the other hand is Adah, who uses her voice least of all. Although Adah “ chooses silence, recognizing its advantages in certain circumstances,” when Adah speaks to the reader, her words are twisty and intriguing (Ognibene 27). Her silence enables to absorb and dissect the situations surrounding her, and her “ social marginalization by both society and family, leaves her free to ponder the wonder of natural world, the absurdity of the human-made world, and the currents of language, biology, and political intrigue flowing around her” (Austenfeld 296). The “ speechless expert,” Adah fills her pages with palindromes, rhymes, and poetry—her way of interpreting the world around her (Mullan 12). However, Adah’s evolution is an impressive one as she eventually engages her voice after leaving the Congo. Free from her father’s rule, further developing her skills and exceling, “ Adah finds her voice in a language of self definition and science” (Ognibene 29). Not only does Adah find her voice, she proceeds to use it to become an advocate as she medically researches AIDS and seeks a sort of forgiveness for her time in Africa and the destruction that she believes she was responsible for.

Orleanna Price also begins to seek forgiveness for the events of the Congo, but like Adah, it is only once she leaves Africa that she is able to discover her voice and use it for empowerment and change. Orleanna’s narrative is the only one in hindsight as she addresses her dead child. Only after she is removed from the horrific situation is Orleanna able to look back, reflect, and discuss the events of the Congo and their impact. Her narrative is told through the “ eyes of wife and mother, focusing on the reasons for deeds and events” (Austenfeld 295). The details and particulars are not important to Orleanna, but rather, the meaning and motive of each action and event. Orleanna’s story reflects back on her silence and the damage this caused to her family, but mainly, the silence that came with being the wife of Nathan Price. Orleanna reflects back on her silence with distaste and says, “ I was his instrument, his animal. Nothing more… I was just one more of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls of to conquer another in war. Guilty or innocent, they have everything to lose” (Kingsovler 89). Looking back at her time in the Congo, Orleanna recognizes that she lost everything. Although at the time she believed that she was doing the best thing for her family and children, her realization that it was just the opposite leaves her with paralyzing guilt. However, without this experience she never would have been able to leave Nathan and find her voice and “ in voice comes redemption” (Ognibene 23). Orleanna’s intensely personal account of the Congo adds a new perspective to the conflict and “ delivers observations that consider philosophical positions not normally covered in the news or historical accounts, so Orleanna’s voice reminds us not to rely on our assumptions or on what we have learned before, but to consider those who live with—or despite—the revolution” (Austenfeld 299). Very few people will ever be missionaries in the Congo during the height of its political conflict trying to raise a family, but Orleanna’s story allows us a peek into what that might have been like and how different one’s views or perceptions might be if they too had to live through this conflict rather than watch it from the outside.

Much of the five women’s stories revolve around the intimidating and fierce Nathan Price, yet he is not given a voice in the novel. When asked why Kingsolver chose to leave out Nathan’s narrative she states that “ We’re the captive witnesses, just like the wife and daughters of Nathan Price. Male or female, we are not like him… we don’t identify with that arrogant voice. It’s not his story. It’s ours” (Some Previous). This story belongs to the Price women because their voices were continually silenced by Nathan. Adah comments on her father’s silencing when she says, “ Our Father speaks for all of us, as far as I can see” (Kingsolver 32). Although in the Congo, Nathan does speak for the women in his family, they are the ones that are able to share their story. By doing so, they strip him of his voice and no longer give him the power to control theirs.

By using five female narrators to narrate the same story, not only does Barbara Kingsovler add more perspectives and emotions to consider, but she also develops a novel that reveals the truth. This story of political conflict, mission work, and American Exceptionalism is only able to be revealed to its deepest level through the eyes of all five women. Without even one of the voices, the story would be drastically lost, as four voices tried to fill in the gaps that only the fifth could fill. As Anne Marie Austenfeld states, “ Kingsolver has learned that truth doesn’t speak with one voice, but with many” (302).