

Voices of no nation



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Voice, specifically one in first-person perspective, often reveals a character's connection to his/her experiences in a text- but it is the variations in a voice that determines the character's identity in these texts. Literary texts that discuss violence in childhood often involve exploration of these different voices in characters, because they provide insight on the environment's effects on the characters. The novel *GraceLand* by Chris Abani and film *Beasts of No Nation* are based on violent topics such as rape, war, and child soldiers; when these topics are expressed through different voices, the result can be powerfully moving and can reveal a lot about the meaning (power? weakness?) of children's innocence in these contexts. In the Netflix original film *Beasts of No Nation*, directed by Cary Fukunaga, main character Agu, a young boy from an unnamed country in Africa, is forced into a rebel group made up of child soldiers. As the war progresses, and Agu is increasingly faced with opportunities of dying, his relationship with his friend Strika and his leader, the Commandant, begin to weigh more heavily on his conscience and will to survive. In Abani's *GraceLand*, main character Elvis lives in Lagos, Nigeria—a dilapidated and rapidly physically and communally deteriorating city. Elvis struggles to come into manhood in a changing society that pressures him to keep up and accept the environment he is forced into. Fukunaga and Abani's characters display their naivety and lack of awareness in their situation by opposing means; Agu does so through internal dialogue, while Elvis literally voices his concern of his lack of knowledge of the world around him. Fukunaga and Abani achieve emotional portrayals of the character's story of hardship and maturity through their character's different forms of self expression and thought. The comparison of this text and film spark a discussion about two violent environments and their impact on the

two main characters. The analysis of Agu's internal dialogue and Elvis' actions of vocal expression of his thoughts spark the questioning of how, when and why the boys choose to voice their emotions.

The use of internal dialogue to portray Agu's thoughts and feelings on what is happening around him is a surprisingly jarring mix of ambiguity and transparency. The ambiguity lies in the many silences during the more intense scenes in the film—as shown in the scene where Agu is ordered by the Commandant to kill a man, who claims to be an innocent engineering student, for the first time. During the entirety of the Commandant's explanation of how to kill the man, as well as when Agu is performing the act, Agu shares no thoughts with the audience. The film itself has white noise buzzing in the background, with the Commandant's orders barely audible. Agu seems to push away his own thoughts in times where he is being brainwashed or forced into something because of his lack of control over his own life. He dismisses his power as a human being to have ideas because he realizes he no longer attains this power—his ideas have become useless to himself as well as others and he is merely being used as a pawn in a larger political issue. Though Agu seems to be entranced in his killing of the man, Agu's actions are revealed to be forced with the Commandant's taunting words as he stands over him: “ Remember what they have taken from you. Remember your suffering and turn it into hate for them.” A mentally scarring situation such as this clearly ranges out of Agu's control and reach of capacity to comprehend, thus explaining his lack of thought and surplus of action, as well as prove his innocence in these situations. His silence during the serious/gruesome/horrifying events that he is involved in leaves the

audience clueless as to what he could possibly be thinking or feeling in those moments.

Scenes like these that essentially cut off the viewers from Agu's mental state, leaving it ambiguous, foreshadow one of the final scenes in the film, where Agu is placed in a therapy session with a social-worker Amy. Amy pushes Agu to speak about his experiences as a child soldier, only to have him sit in silence, and the audience is finally opened to his explanation of his silence::

“ She thinks that my not speaking is because I can't be explaining myself like a baby...but I am not like baby, I am like old man, and she is like small girl, because I am fighting in war and she is not even knowing what war is.”

This quote is said in a voice over, allowing only the audience to hear. Amy pushing Agu to open up to her about his feelings parallel the audience's desire for Agu to reveal these same elements. Agu's failure to do so verbally, but his ability to clarify to the audience his feelings through internal dialogue reveal that the war was not the only reason as to why Agu was silent throughout the movie. Agu can't comprehend the concept of discussing the past with others, because he can't comprehend his past enough to even discuss it with himself.

Unlike Agu, Elvis physically voices his concerns and confusion about these situations, rather than internalizes them; he looks to other people for clarity and seeks the truth about situations he is put in. One of the opening scenes in the novel feature Elvis at 5 years old, partaking in a traditional ceremony in which a young boy becomes a man. The ceremony includes the killing of a

<https://assignbuster.com/voices-of-no-nation/>

baby eagle by the boy, and with permission from the village elders, is proclaimed a “man”. Unfortunately for Elvis, lack of resources and the dwindling spirit of traditionalism in his community force his ceremony to comprise of a pre-killed chick instead. Elvis, naive to the significance of the ceremony, rattles off multiple questions to his father and uncle: “What is happening?” “But why must I kill an eagle?” “Is this an eagle chick?” And even questions his father after he claims Elvis killed the chick, “I didn’t,” to which his father replies “You did.” The overflow of inquiries coming from Elvis illustrate how Elvis is unable understand what the purposes of the ceremony entail. Similar to Agu’s first experience with killing, Elvis only carries out the ceremony because he is pressured to do so by forces greater than himself, and both characters are in an environment where they must submit to these forces simply because their society is set up that way. Elvis’ questioning of his society is because of the similar feeling Agu has, where he is being brainwashed by people, such as his father and the elders, to believe that “tradition” carries on, and the next generation’s purpose is to continue this, rather than form their own thoughts and ideas about them. Elvis’ continuity of outspoken questioning foreshadows the failure of his society’s set up, where the verbalizing of new ideas and the creation of conversation about them is becoming more prevalent.

The feeling of not understanding the life you live in is unsettling and, especially to children, is an essential part of discovering who you are as a person and what role in life you are going to play: what voice you will have in society. Elvis, struggles with this throughout GraceLand and while Agu is given a “purpose” in his life (to be a soldier) and chooses internal dialogue

to accompany this new life he has been thrust into, Elvis has a more difficult time pinpointing what voice he wants to have, and instead mimics ones similar to other characters in the novel such as the King, his mentor. Elvis is apart of a society that does not physically choose the “ fate” of others, like in Agu’s world, however it does subliminally pressure people, specifically men, to fall into certain categories, and Elvis feels this underhanded pressure throughout the novel, when two important people in his life, the King and Redemption, have opposing ideas on how he should participate in society. Elvis’ mentor, the King, the neighborhood beggar, plays an influential role in this dilemma. In a bar, Elvis listens to the King give a speech about politics and the necessity to overthrow the current government. Elvis is amazed by the King’s deliverance of his speech, but catches himself getting distracted by music that is playing nearby. This proves he is more focused on the theatrics of the King’s speech, and sees it as a performance rather than an attempt at a political revolution. The King’s attitude in this context, one that is outspoken and sure of himself, may be a contribution to the outspoken tendencies Elvis has himself, as his way of emulating the kind of man he wants to be seen as. This attitude gets put to the test whenever he comes into contact with his friend, Redemption, who is the complete opposite of Elvis in the way that he does not want to flesh out the truths of situations, and would rather turn a blind eye to it entirely. When Redemption proposed to Elvis the opportunity to partake in a sketchy job offered as an “ escort” by even sketchier drug dealers, Elvis is dubious of taking the job because of the lack of information given to him about it. Elvis tells him, “ Why should I trust you when you want me to take a risk without telling me the whole story?”, in which Redemption responds “ Only a dead man tells everything, only a fool

asks.” This response is what catalyzes a full blown argument between the two friends, and is strong evidence that Elvis clearly wants to be aware and in control of his life, like the King attempts to teach him (and attempts to do so by voicing his concerns in a theatrical way) but he is held back by people in his society who live their lives based off of blindly making decisions as a way to cope with the violence in the city they reside.

Agu’s filtering of bad situations exclusive to him through internal dialogue, contrast to Elvis, who only digests and speaks out on dangerous or bad situations that he is solely involved in. He discovers this about himself when Redemption exposes this trait, after Elvis expresses concern about his cousin, whom he hasn’t spoken of in years, but is only reminded of her when he sees a woman that resembles her, “ Dis Elvis, you dey very selfish...When it concerns you, nothing is true...Instead you try to carry yourself as if nobody can understand you.” Redemption describes Elvis’ individualistic mentality to be “ selfish”, however Elvis continues to use this mentality as a way of sorting out difficult decisions he needs to make. Agu’s character seems to be on the opposite end of the spectrum, with little to no thoughts concerning himself specifically. This could be a mix of the fact that his lethal “ job” as a child soldier doesn’t allow him to believe that he as an individual has a purpose, as shown in the scene where the NDF is raiding a village and, in a voice over, Agu says “ My gun is marking on my hand. I am servant to be doing whatever it says.” The scene of the NDF firing at the hysterical villagers creates a terrifying sense of comradeship, forcing Agu to believe that he is a member of the group, rather than an individual in the army. The voice in Agu’s head merely serves as objective dictation, with his eyes as the lens

the scene is dictated from, and is dictated totally in the present-tense. Agu uses the present-tense narrative in contexts where he feels that his soul is intact, but not connected with the actions that his body- not his mind- is making. Agu separates himself as a human being from the context when doing this, thus filtering out the severity of the situation, making himself only a part of the fixed picture, rather than one who is an active component being affected by it.

Both Agu and Elvis are young boys living lives dominated by violence- this brutal reality is out of their control and they seek to find ways to cope with the cards they were dealt. Agu's position as a child soldier leaves him nearly no room to freely ask questions about his surroundings the way Elvis does, but it is rare that he even asks questions in the solace of his own mind. And though his internal dialogue adds personal and intimate qualities to the context, it prevents Agu from absorbing any of the stimuli surrounding him and only when the Commandant is at his weakest is Agu able to stand up for himself. Elvis, on the other hand, is rarely seen internalizing thoughts without seeking advice from or venting to someone else in his life. Agu's habit of being in his own head negatively affects his mental state in a similar way to how Elvis' lack of inner dialogue negatively affects his mental state. These two different ways digesting their surroundings both effectively demonstrate the boy's naivety compared to those controlling them. These ways also make sense in the contexts the boys are in: Agu is restricted by the rebel army to literally say what he is feeling because of the deadly repercussions this may cause, and Elvis is in a changing modernizing city that allows him to physically voice questions and concerns he has (though

even this has its limits from the government) but Elvis runs into more trouble finding his place in a city where people continuously turn a blind eye to reality, whereas he craves answers to questions of why things are the way they are for him. His society's perspective of questioning life rely on the idea of their lives being predetermined by " fate". Elvis struggles to find his place and purpose. This comparison of Agu and Elvis reveal completely opposite sides of the coin in terms of children's abilities and the contradicting methods they choose to cope with traumatizing experiences.