Alphabetical Africa's Relationship Between Language and Meaning

Asra Syed '00
Illinois Wesleyan University

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by Asra Syed

> Language is not a barrier. Language
> enables people in all circumstances to
> cope with a changing world; it also
> permits them to engage in all sorts of
> activities without unduly antagonizing
> everyone in their immediate vicinity ...
> I'm not really concerned with language.
> As a writer, I'm principally concerned
> with meaning. (72)

In this conclusion of his short piece entitled "Access," Walter
Abish asserts almost exactly the opposite of what he does with language in
his first novel, *Alphabetical Africa*. Or as Richard Martin puts it, "The
irony of the author of *Alphabetical Africa* asserting the superiority of
meaning over mere language, or of even suggesting the possibility of
divorcing language from meaning, is in itself threatening" (235). In

Alphabetical Africa Abish certainly has a meaning he is concentrated on getting across, but he does not neglect the functions and barriers of language necessary to achieve that meaning. In fact, as a novel in the genre of avant-garde literature, Abish's *Alphabetical Africa* is susceptible to some critics who argue whether or not avant-garde novels actually do tell a story, or if they merely reflect upon themselves and their own language. As Anthony Schirato explains, *Alphabetical Africa* is a combination of both

> the notion of textual discourse as nothing
> more than the product of a system that is
> capable only of reproducing that system
> and ... a notion of discourse as being full
> of references to its connection with the
> world outside of language and of its
> dealings and relationships with politics,
> colonialism, and exploitation. (135)

So, while Abish asserts in "Access" that he concerns himself with meaning rather than language, and these critics assert that avant-garde literature involves itself with language to the point that the story is lost, *Alphabetical Africa* deals with both meaning of a story and the language through which that story is told and, moreover, it concerns itself with the relationship of the two.

Abish wrote *Alphabetical Africa* within a strict structure where the first chapter, A, only has words beginning with the letter A, and then the next chapter, B, contains words only beginning with the letters A and B and so forth until it gets to the chapter Z, which is the only time it can have all the letters in the alphabet. It then goes backwards from Z to A in such a way that the text constructs and then deconstructs itself. With this structure, Abish seems to be commenting on language and taking it a step further by getting down to the root of language with the alphabet, dissecting language to figure it out, and then commenting on it. This form controls the story Abish is telling, but he does still tell a story, a comical and political story of a sexual and sensual woman named Alva, the men chasing after her — the narrator of the story being one of them — and their adventures in Africa.

It also tells a story of imperialism, colonial exploitation and the eradication of African tradition through language and lack of understanding. According to James Peterson, "Abish's is a story of imperialism struggling with the inadequacy of its communication media" (20). The novel approaches this theme of inadequacy of communication,

but only serves to further it, for the narrator explains, "Understanding Africa requires patience" (55); yet he says, "But I am an unreliable reporter. I can't be depended upon for exact descriptions and details.... I have distorted so much, concealed so much, forgotten so much. But I have discovered that people are patient. They say about me: Has a longing. He is still uncovering Africa" (56). The narrator tells the reader he is working on discovering Africa, but that he can't be relied on to depict it accurately. Yet he's not apologizing for his inaccurate depiction, but merely stating it; he really doesn't think he has any reason to be apologetic, for, as he says later in the novel, "Books about Africa are deceptive at best" (133). The narrator claims he doesn't have to be reliable by using the justification that nothing written about Africa is reliable.

Faced with a history he seems unable to understand or depict, the narrator does the only thing he knows how — manipulate it with language. He says, "If I am ever asked how I could erase history, I can answer at once. It was easy. I bought an eraser. After carefully choosing an East African dictionary, I began erasing a few phrases" (114-5). He tells us just how simple it is to get rid of what he doesn't understand by using, or actually by removing, language. Also, throughout the novel, the author keeps mentioning how Africa is shrinking, and by the end of the novel, the Africa that was once there is gone, for the last few words of the novel tell us that the old Africa has been replaced with "another Africa" (152). The capacity of language is such that one letter of the alphabet, the letter A, secures the power to erase the African tradition and end Africa in the text. With the removal of Africa, this story line shows language as an important element of the concept of the Imperialist impulse in *Alphabetical Africa*. In this way, both the shortcomings and the power of language — its shortcoming in its inability to depict Africa accurately and then its power in its ability to get rid of Africa — serve as part of the plot of the novel.

Despite this power the narrator has, he still shows himself to be unreliable in other ways as well. The most significant way he does this is by contradicting himself. The second paragraph of the novel ends, "Author apprehends Alva anatomically, affirmatively and also accurately" (1), explaining that the narrator accurately depicts Alva, and, we are to assume, the story. Yet, the narrator later says, "My memory isn't accurate anymore" (33), and then again tells us, "I've had a few lapses, a few lapses of memory. Not deliberate lapses" (114). This same narrator has also said, "I have not made any concessions. I have not invented anything I've seen or done" (40), but then, "in distress," he later tells us, "facts can

always be changed, can always be adjusted, can always be altered" (125). So we can never tell which facts he is telling us are true and which have been "changed, adjusted or altered." This unreliability of the narrator also reflects upon the story in another way and comments on another type of fallibility of language and literature. Abish explains why he often uses unreliable narrators in his writing by saying, "I am and have for some time been intrigued by the idea of fiction exploring itself ... Within that context the narrator often plays a double role, frequently an unreliable one, a role in which what he sees, and how he sees it can isolate and also mar the logical sequence of events that might have been expected to follow" (Klinkowitz 95). Viewing a story through the eyes of a narrator is a typical means of writing a text, and by distorting the literary technique, Abish comments on literature, while at the same time changing his story from what it otherwise would have been.

Abish explains that since he felt "a distrust of the understanding that is intrinsic to any communication, I decided to write a book in which my distrust became a determining factor upon which the flow of the narrative was largely predicated" (Klinkowitz 94). Again the inaccuracy of the narrator manifests this distrust of which Abish speaks. The narrator makes the reader distrustful through his confused description of Queen Quat, the transvestite queen of Tanzania. The narrator describes Quat by using phrases such as "*Her* name has been omitted" and "*He*'s not a German" (44, italics added). And then he explains this inconsistency in Queen Quat's gender by saying "Occasionally I make a mistake and change his gender. I have given him another name" (44). With the narrator's admittance of his mistakes, he forces the reader to question the truth in what the narrator says about Quat, and more generally, in anything the narrator says about any of the characters.

The reader is forced to question other aspects of the language and plot relationship as well. "As an author again attempts an agonizing alphabetical appraisal" (Abish 1-2), *Alphabetical Africa* limits itself with the number of letters that begin words allowed in each specific chapter, and the reader has to question why Abish, as an author of a story, would have "a story line that expands and contracts depending on the availability of certain letters of the alphabet" (Scharito 133). Abish explains why he does this, saying, "I was fascinated to discover the extent to which a system could impose upon the contents of a work a meaning that was fashioned by the form, and then to see the degree to which the form, because of the conspicuous obstacles, undermined that very meaning" (Klinkowitz 96). In other words, he was manipulating his reader through

language to show the outcome of such manipulation. The outcome is that, while "under the weight of the restricted vocabulary, the grammar of the sentences is twisted," and "readability suffers along with the rues of grammar" (Peterson 16) — which Peterson views as a negative aspect to Abish's novel — Abish still successfully manages to express his thoughts and the plot of the story through his own "alphabet authority" (Abish 2). Eventually syntax and semantics emerge, and yet before this happens, Abish shows just how much he can do without these grammatical tools. Interestingly, the plot seems more limited in the chapters with more letters available. There seems to be more interesting plot development and description in chapter A than in the later chapters, such as Z, where there are no self-inflicted limitations or obvious restrictions of language. Paradoxically, Abish shows that while he can accomplish so much in language while manipulating its rules, language is still inherently fallible.

Abish deliberately shows another fallibility in language by using his own system as an example. With his almost methodical addition and subtraction of letters, he insists on a rigid system of language, and then he deconstructs that very system. For example, right from the start, he places a word in that doesn't belong. In the last line of chapter one, he writes, "Alex and Allen alone arrive *in* Abidjan and await African amusements" (2, italics added). This was a mistake Abish didn't have to make. He could very easily have gotten around as he does on the next page where, in the same context, he uses a word that works within the system: "Alex, Allen and Alva arrive *at* Antibes" (3, italics added). By using "at" the second time, Abish declares that he purposefully used the wrong word the first time to make a point. Abish purposefully makes this "mistake" at least seven other times in the book, including once in the second chapter P, where he incorrectly uses the word "quiet," and then acknowledges it five lines later, saying, "A dreadful error has been committed" (112). Abish places these deliberate "oversights" in his rigid system to show the possibility of deficiency in all language. This is Abish's way of recognizing that his novel is all a construct and using this recognition to draw attention to the fictive and constructed nature of all language and literature.

With this recognition of the mistakes of the language, Abish makes his reader question everything about language, including the letters of the language. Appropriately, the last words of his novel, "another alphabet" (152), make the reader not only question the language that is there, but the language that is missing too, for perhaps there is another language we don't realize exists or have altogether forgotten. And what could we do

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with that other alphabet, Abish makes his readers ask themselves. In that same manner, Abish also presents deliberate gaps in the language that he does use and makes the reader question what is missing there as well. In chapter A, the reader assumes that the awkwardness of the grammar is not because of poor writing style on the author's part, but a result of the missing words due to the alphabetical constraints he has because of his self-imposed structure. At the beginning of the text, Abish does this in a concealed manner, but near the end of the novel, he consciously shows what he has been doing with gaps in the text:

> Alva enters a dark apartment, and despite a certain experience expresses astonishment as an Ethiopian architect embraces and (deleted) enters abruptly by compelling Alva (deleted) all exhausted as (deleted) before even closing a door, as Alva calls Alex, but confronted by another appendage (deleted) drops (deleted). Appealing (deleted) as an entire (deleted) carefully caressing and (deleted) as ever (deleted) expands and contortion after contortion demonstrates an explosive conclusion. Eventually, after another (deleted) emerges as a depleted and enervated (deleted) but Alva's cries aren't answered. Both (deleted) depart after breaking down Alva's (deleted) . . . . (140-1)

Just as the reader had to interpret the novel for him or herself due to the unreliability of the narrator, the reader also has to interpret much of the text because the reader is to assume that certain words are purposefully missing or "(deleted)." With that in mind, the reader is forced to question what words are missing and what those words could add to the reading of the text and the interpretation of language. Abish, coincidentally a former architect, explains the gaps by comparing them to the vanishing points in a postcard of a palace the narrator sends Shirley: "Vanishing points are simply an architectural contrivance, but to me they are also an appropriate explanation for my conduct" (87). Abish uses these purposeful silences and constructed gaps in the text to show the natural limits of language.

Another criticism Abish has of the limitations of language is discussed in the second chapter K, where the narrator compares books to knives. He compares the two saying that the knowledge of books cannot replace the knowledge acquired through committing an act, such as the act of killing someone. He says, "Like everything else, experience doesn't

come easily at first. Certainly books don't describe intense excitement as an assailant flashes a knife" (123). In addition to making the reader question the narrator again, this chapter serves to show a deficiency in books and language because, while books can provide knowledge, they cannot provide practical experience, however practical the knowledge of how to "accurately direct a knife into another body" may be. Abish ends the chapter on a humorous note, saying, "Inept assailants are easily detected, because invariably all are burdened by a book, frequently confusing it for a knife" (124).

With this wit, Abish shows that while he questions language and its limitations, he also has an immense interest in and appreciation for it. He shows the reader that he finds amusement in language by playing word games and having fun with language. For instance, in the first chapter M, when discussing the murder of the jeweler Nicholas, he says about him, "He had made a killing here" (32). It's a simple play on words, and yet it's humorous and shows that, while Abish has a very serious purpose for this book, there is still a comic side to it. Abish is saying that, even with the inherent fallibility of language and all its imperfections — purposeful or not — and its serious topic, *Alphabetical Africa* is still a very amusing book, and interesting language is how he makes it so. In the end, Abish is, afterall, a writer.

As a writer, Abish comments on language, criticizes it and yet he appreciates it and demands the same from his reader. With the structure of the book, he shows his reader that he or she cannot take language for granted. Abish questions the role of language, its function in plot, how and when it falls short and when it is misleading or restrictive, and yet with those same questions and that same story, he shows his reader the importance and complexity of language. In many ways — with the structure of his text, for instance — , he seems to take language away from his reader, but with his questions of literature, he gives language back to his reader, this time with more of a critical and conscious view of language, and with more appreciation for it.

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