

Emotional Distress and Identity Fear in Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds”

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Abstract

Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” portrays the after-effects of the global pandemic in a dystopian society. The people of Los Angeles are in a crumbling situation with the loss of speech and other specific skills. Rye is the protagonist who has lost her family in this crisis and is on the way to her brother’s house in Pasadena. The paper deals with the emotional distress and identity fear of the disturbed individuals and the social disorder. They are affected by environmental factors like materialistic discomforts, impaired disabilities, and violent traits of affected individuals. Even Rye is always found with a gun for her safety, though she does not want to hurt anyone. This short story brings to the reader specific details of a day in the life of Rye and her meeting with Obsidian with sudden twists and an unexpected climax to the plot. She begins the day all alone and later is happy with the company of a kind man but loses him and ends up taking two little children who can utter words. When silence has become a deadly illness wiping out the peace of society, Rye grows hopeful when she finds those two children with clear pronunciation.

Keywords: Communication, disability, illness, pandemic, silence, violence

“Speech Sounds” (1983), the short story of Octavia Butler, was published in Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine, for which she was awarded the first Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1984. The articulation of speech sounds determines the ability of one’s communication, and it is an ordinary skill of a person in day-to-day life. Breaking the monotonous lifestyle, the severe pandemic in society has brought shocking repercussions. In Los Angeles, Rye, the protagonist of the story, has lost her husband, children, and parents.

She had lost reading and writing, her most serious impairment and her most painful.

She had taught history at UCLA and done freelance writing. Now, she could not even

read her own manuscripts. She had a houseful of books that she could neither read nor bring herself to use as fuel. And she had a memory that would not bring back to her much of what she had read before (Butler 84).

Despite losing relationships, the survivors were deprived of the ability to read, write, and speak. “And in this world where the only likely common language was body language, being armed was often enough. She had rarely had to draw her gun or even display it” (Butler 80).

Symbols and gestures have become the medium of communication. “People screamed or squawked in fear. Those nearby scrambled to get out of the way. Three more young men roared in excitement and gestured wildly” (Butler 78). In such a scenario, people grew disappointed in their shortcomings and were jealous of other’s abilities. Even if one possessed the skill to speak or read, they were forced to hide the ability, as violence was rampant in and around the ruined society. “Language was always lost or severely impaired. It was never regained. Often there was also paralysis, intellectual impairment, death” (Butler 82). Henceforth, the paper analyses the emotional distress and fear of people forced people to hide their ability and identity through their experiences after the illness.

When one is affected by environmental, financial, psychological, social, or economic factors, one's emotions will be imbalanced. Emotions are the mirror of the mind, and here, the protagonist, Rye, has been all alone for three long years, having lost her three children and husband.

The illness had stripped her, killing her children one by one, killing her husband, her sister, her parents... The illness, if it was an illness, had cut even the living off from one another. As it swept over the country, people hardly had time to lay blame on the Soviets (though they were falling silent along with the rest of the world), on a new virus, a new pollutant, radiation, divine retribution... The illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and stroke-like in some of its effects. However, it was highly specific (Butler 82).

The disease has had a massive impact, leaving the survivors with the disability to speak, read or write. Facial and body gestures are substituted in the place of speech sounds, and mundane conversation is suddenly reduced to mere signals. Rye feels that “she would never hear her

name spoken again” (Butler 83). This situation has forced survivors to protect their lives from the eyes of jealousy, violence, and protest. Anarchy was let loose in society and the place was no more a paradise as it was before.

No government was in function, and murder, teasing, and violence became a part of survival. “Loss of verbal language had spawned a whole new set of obscene gestures” (Butler 81). The identity of a person determines the beliefs and principles, and normally, a person would be proud to represent the talents. “Identities are relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” (Wendt 397). On the contrary, the affected survivors of the pandemic conceal their speaking or reading skills to save their lives.

Thus, the survivors with mere ability to read or write have to hide their skills because they may become the victim of violent behaviour. People possess a fear of identity - “Identity refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities” (Jenkins 4) and to quote, even Rye grew jealous when she found Obsidian’s reading skill as she has lost it. “He could probably write, too. Abruptly, she hated him— deep, bitter hatred. She felt sick to her stomach with hatred, frustration, and jealousy. And only a few inches from her hand were a loaded gun” (Butler 84).

The other notable positive character is Obsidian, who tries to protect the weaker ones. “His use of the left hand interested Rye more than his obvious question. Left-handed people tended to be less impaired, more reasonable and comprehending, less driven by frustration, confusion, and anger” (Butler 79). He even broke up the fight on a bus and offered Rye a ride in his car. After three long years of loneliness, Rye and Obsidian made love. They decided to stay together but Obsidian lost his life in his attempt to save a woman from the attacker. “The bullet caught Obsidian in the temple and he collapsed. It happened just that simply, just that fast. An instant later, Rye shot the wounded man as he was turning the gun on her. And Rye was alone—with three corpses” (Butler 89). Rye stood still as everything happened in a minute, and then her confusion and hopelessness changed into a meaningful life.

The atmosphere of the story carries lot of meaning reflecting the disturbed psyche and anarchy of the pandemic affected society. Though it is just 30 minutes from Washington to Pasedana, it is mentioned that Rye calculates it would take at least a full day to reach the destination for

such is the plight of the people. When Obsidian and Rye travel by car, the author describes the boundaries of the wasteland.

As they passed blocks of burned, abandoned buildings, empty lots, and wrecked or stripped cars, he slipped a gold chain over his head and handed it to her. The pendant attached to it was a smooth, glassy, black rock. Obsidian. His name might Rock or Peter or Black, but she decided to think of him as Obsidian (Butler 83).

The emotional distress and fear of identity that has affected of Rye has resulted in loneliness, segregation, and huge misery. Meeting Obsidian was a blessing in disguise as she realised the value of life and the kindness of a person after three years. "She had experienced longing for the past, hatred of the present, growing hopelessness, purposelessness, but she had never experienced such a powerful urge to kill another person" (Butler 85).

The children of the present generation have lost a pleasant childhood where they were neither morally trained nor educated. The ill effects of the pandemic have wiped out the destiny of the younger generation. "Today's children gathered books and wood to be burned as fuel. They ran through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. They had no future. They were now all they would ever be" (Butler 86). This passage portrays the turmoil of the scenario where the innocence and education of a generation have been destroyed.

Despite the fact that Rye and Obsidian decide to take a chance at a new beginning in life, the latter got off the car to protect the woman from being attacked by a man. He carries a sense of responsibility in pursuing the morality and duty of protecting his society even though the police service was inactive. He ran after them to prevent murder. "He made the same sound over and over the way some speechless people did, "Da, da, da!" (Butler 88).

With shattered dreams in a minute, Rye overcomes the chaos by her decision to give Obsidian a decent burial. She was astonished by the clear speech of the two little children. Fluent speech! Had the woman died because she could talk and had taught her children to talk? Had she been killed by a husband's festering anger or by a stranger's jealous rage? And the children... they must have been born after the silence (Butler 90).

That was the point where the emotional distress and Rye's fear of identity were channelised into a clarity of hopeful thought. She decided that the disease had lost its effect and that these

children may be able to learn language. Like Obsidian, she protects the dead woman's children by saying, "I'm Valerie Rye," she said, savouring the words. "It's all right for you to talk to me." " (Butler 90). Even though Rye lost a good soul like Obsidian, Rye's three years of loneliness were substituted by the presence of two innocent children.

Works Cited

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