The Voiceless Citizens in James Kelman's Translated Accounts

Fadi Mumtaz Yousif Alrayes
Closemoon35@yahoo.com
Supervised by
Asst. Prof. Anan J Lewis Alkass Yousif, PhD
anan_alkassyousif@yahoo.com
University of Baghdad/ College of Arts

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31973/aj.v3i143.3931

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this paper is to underline James Kelman's voiceless working class figures in a cosmopolitan world, arguing that the peripheral and unprivileged part of Scotland is the very factor that reconstructs the modern diverse reality of Scottish culture. This article discusses Kelman's *Translated Accounts* and shows how the peripheral live under a state of oppression deprived from their individual freedom and individuality where fear and anxiety hunt his characters. *Translated Accounts* is a novel about two unnamed groups, but they represent two poles: the privileged and the periphery. Though the novel depicts unknown characters and setting, one might immediately make the connection between the unfair living conditions of the Scottish working class individual and these hidden figures. Interestingly, Kelman's choice to make his characters and setting anonymous is to add a cosmopolitan notion that the oppression of the periphery is still all over the world.

Keywords: State, Oppression, Class, Individuality, Fear, Resistance, Voiceless, Periphery, Privileged

The Scottish working class novelist James Kelman (1946) is known being a representative of the Glasgow voice by mostly presenting a Glaswegian working class character, Scotland, and dialect in all his literary canon expect for his novel *Translated Accounts* (2001). Novels like *A Disaffection* (1989), *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) or *Dirt Road* (2016) all come around to deal with the social and cultural issues of the Scottish working class individual introducing a local color to the reader, despite that they all deal with state harassment. Conversely, In *Translated Accounts*, Kelman attempts, for the first time, to step out of his usual literary tradition and utilising a new literary technique and way of writing in order to present an even more oppressive state system than before. Simon Kövesi in *James Kelman* states that "Kelman's *Translated Accounts* though did not win an award, marked a watershed in the development of his fiction" (64). He depicts a cosmopolitan world divided into two unnamed groups or classes, one group is privileged and holding state powers, and the

other is the periphery[1], and characters along with narrators that are unknown and unidentified living in a setting that is enforced by a coercive law and order. The state murders and violates only the unprivileged children, women, and men in cold blood who try to escape that place. These people are not allowed to practice their individual daily life freely and humanly which stresses how their individuality is sunk to the ground. Scott Hames describes that world as a place "exposed to atrocities and military harassment, lack of freedom and justice where the individual lives in anxiety, alienation, fear of death, and suffers from individuality crisis" (12). Hames adds that it is the first time that Kelman intensifies the state aggression towards the people of variant ages and gender: the old, the young, and even infants without a previous reason, perhaps because they consider themselves socially and culturally superior to the other oppressed group (45). The characters, then develop a burst of resentment and loathsome towards that regime immigrating to a safer place. However, Kelman might still be indirectly positing questions regarding state oppression deciding not to limit his feud with the state only within the Scottish border, but taking that tension into a whole new level by making it on a cosmopolitan scale. Thus, Kelman the politician wants to prove that state brutality can be everywhere where the periphery is threatened by its power holders and dominant class and forced to leave their patria.

This novel is even more different than its priors for being written in an episodic narrative style as in each of its 54 chapters a new fragmented story [2]or event about state abuse is narrated by a different unnamed and peripheral narrator to complete the whole narrative of the novel[3]. This emphasizes that every narrator utters a disjoint story that has no connection to its priors, and is of no certain beginning, middle, and ending, however, the common major theme is that of law enforcement abuse. Kelman's purpose from piecing together fragments of stories is to stir the feeling that the life of these anonymous narrators are shattered into pieces due to state mistreatment. Despite all of that, like *A Disaffection* and *Kieron Smith, Boy*

[1] For further information, see Kovesi. A cosmopolitan setting is a sort of literary technique used by writers to engage in talking about not only a certain nation but various ones. Thereupon, in *Translated Accounts,* the characters and narrators do not have any identity details so that the reader does not know their race, class, nationality (23).

[2] For further information, see Klages. The French philosophers Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Felix Guattari (1930-1992) in the essay A *Thousand Plateaus* (1980) argue that the postmodern narrative style tends to be as Rhizome or crabgrass grows in all over a garden with no definite root of its growing seed and when one uproots a piece of crabgrass, the other parts will remain growing because those other parts have no connection to the one that is uprooted. In other words, the postmodern narrative is Rhizome because it has no beginning, middle, and ending as well as most of the events lack connection and explanations (176).

[3] For further information, see Head. In *How Late It Was, How Late, A Disaffection, Kieron Smith, Boy* (2008) Kelman sets to use only one narrator that consequently is Sammy Samuel, Patrick Doyle, and Kieron Smith (19).

(2008) Kelman follows the mixture point of view shifting back and forth from the first-person voice to the third person-narrator including short doses of a stream of consciousness (Kovesi 10).[4]

Unlike Kelman's previous novels that are dialogic[5], *Translated Accounts* is written in a monologic[6] style by which the narrators of each chapter tells a piece of narrative where they are the absolute voice of that chapter with no other character speaking its perspective, or thoughts. This makes the author tells a story similar to a poem where there is only one speaker disclosing his perspective (Baker 47). Such a literary technique, on the one hand, might be understood as a means to show and emphasize that there is only one dominant social group in the entire novel that its cultural and social norms are pervasive and forced to be abided by the downtrodden. On the other hand, since all the ultimate narrators are unknown and peripheral, this propels forth that all the voices of narrators are not heard or respond to for they utter and receive no answer or a listening ear to their life complaints. His technique of not naming his characters emphasizes that those characters do not have individuality and the fact that the reader does not know who the character is and where he is from furthers his confusion. Kelman only makes use of pronouns, not character titles like "they, he, and she" to refer to all of the characters within this text which begs the questioning "who asks the question", therefore, leading the reader to wonder who those characters are (Head 18).

Furthermore, the novel is a bulky one and it stretched into 54 chapters which means that his characters will suffer more and more for a long period under power structure. Also, the length of the novel posits the notion that living under absolute state power makes life hard to bear and the unknown characters feel the time has frozen trying to end or get out of this constant oppression. The language is a dry mechanical one that addresses the mind more than emotions making it not easy to the reader and confusing. The choice of words like "state, bureaucracy, bureau, investigation, police, statistics, etc.," brings forth the notion that the characters are in state confines (Bernstein 11). A review made by *The*

[4] For further information, see Hames. Unlike Kelman, Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* did not follow such short doses of a stream of consciousness and sudden shifts in narration but created a break to help the reader track and recognize when he used the stream of consciousness. In other words, Kelman uses in one paragraph multiple shifts in narration style unlike Joyce (130).

[5] For further information, see Hames.In a dialogic narrative like in *A Disaffection*, Patrick's brother Gavin reveals his own voice or perspective on mobility and he supports it, unlike Patrick whose perspective about it is negative. His family also has its perspective by supporting mobility and finding it a good thing (69).

[6] For further information, see Bressler. The notion of monologue and dialogue or as referred to by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) polyphony and monophony is first approached in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) (30).

Guardian describes the language of *Translated Accounts* as if "it has been written in a language that is translated by a computer or similar to a robot when it speaks" (Aitkenhead). This stresses the sense that the unknown characters are like robots obey rules and do what it said to them, reflecting how less human they are and lack individuality in that abusive world. Craig Cairns provides another view about this language saying that it "has been transcribed and/or translated into English, not always by persons native to the tongue" (56), and therefore the title of the novel suggests that this novel is a series of accounts being translated by a computer or a person not native to the English tongue. Crucially enough, like in *A Disaffection* or *Kieron Smith, Boy* where the apostrophes are omitted to bridge the social and cultural gap between the working and middle class, here in this novel, the robotic language is uttered by the two classes: the privileged and the periphery, perhaps for the same purpose (Hames 40). Hence, Kelman utilizes a narrative style and language that manages him to expose state violation to the rights of its subjects as well as unveiling their unbearable life condition. The subsequent quotation illustrates Kelman's literary technique and how he manipulates the treatment of language in *Translated Accounts*:

This woman was familiar with their dialect, I have said, that language. They knew nothing of hers. Thus she had become inferior. This is as it was, it remains so, for myself also, individuals interiorized, myself herself. She had become inferior as I also became at the prior time. These matters were occurring. All periods are significant. And effected through the one factor. It is asked of the one factor, can it exist Who asks the question. They come in the night. They drag us from sleep, from sleep into sleep, as unto death. Myself herself. (317: Ch 40)

The first line of the quotation starts in the first-person voice of the unknown narrator of chapter 40 in which he talks about an unidentified woman who seems to be familiar in the dialect of the privileged group. Then, the narration shifts suddenly to the third voice viewpoint informing the reader that the language of the unidentified woman is inferior to that group or those who is referred to as "They," and the latter has no interest in hers. Then, the narration shifts back to the first person narrator emphasizing that he too similar to that woman is not privileged. Then finally, the third-person voice comes back revealing that those they oppress those who are similar to this woman and narrator's kinds or class to the degree that they drag them out of their beds while sleeping. It is unknown who that woman and narrator are and who those "they" are, but as readers, one can infer that Kelman is depicting a society based on a class system where one is privileged controlling power structures and the other is trodden. [7] The language in this quotation sounds as if it has been translated by someone

[7] For further information, see Kovesi. In *Translated Account*, Kelman depicts a world similar to George Orwell's 1984 which shows a society controlled by the Big Brother state and where people get punished in secret multiple rooms numbered indifferently (30).

who lacks first-hand experience in English which makes it less elevated and standard than the original or it likens to a robot's utterances as it can be shown in the last two lines. The narrator of chapter 30 says that "They spoke a dialect that rendered them inferior, but they were not inferior, they did not allow of it" (Kelman, *Translated Accounts* 227). Consequently, Kelman's manipulation of language dismantles its aesthetic value and breaks cultural and social barriers between the woman, narrator, and they which is ironic because even those who are called they speak in this broken robotic language.

The State oppression and the Unknown Citizens

The issue of state misconduct and crime can be noticed in almost all Kelman literature, but what makes *Translated Accounts* stands alone in its state oppression representation is that it has been done in a vicious, graphic, and dystopian manner. It is described as "Kelman's most dismal novel as far as his criticism of social and political control is concerned" (Baker 57). Even what happens to Sammy after getting beaten mercilessly and blinded by the police in *How Late, It Was, How Late* is nothing comparing to fire massacre, mass execution, and beheadings that the unknown characters witness in this novel. This brings forth the concept that the French Neo-Marxist Louis Althusser (1918–1990) calls repressive state apparatus which is an apparatus of coercive power practiced by the ruling group over the less powered one to maintain authority in society (Tyson 40).

The novel starts with the first unknown narrator watching a number of what he names as they or "securitys[8]" or what the reader might call as oppressors beating monstrously a bunch of women and boys without a prior reason. The narrator translates this incident, "I see blood women. Boys on the ground yelling mama . They beat with no mercy and them happy" (1: Ch 1). By not specifying any further details about where and who those oppressed are allows Kelman to say that the periphery lives all around the world not only those in Scotland are compromised. This is supported by Kelman's political inclination who finds not only the Scottish working class to be mistrusted, rather he sees the Iraqi Kurds, and Muslims and Christians in China as marginalized groups (Kovesi 69). In another account, like Sammy's hatred in *How Late It Was, How Late* towards the Scottish State, a narrator shows his resentment and anger towards those they who terrorize those oppressed like him considering his homeland and everything in it as theirs. They pretend, he says skeptically, to know the language he utters as though to sound benevolent to the people of his kind which is ironic because they are oppressors:

I did not love these people [They]. I might have become bitter. They did not love me. They had no regard for me. They saw the mountains I saw the mountains, they saw the mountains of home as I also, yes, I saw home, as they say, "their", their mountains I might say "mine", my mountains, our mountains, they say land I said ground. They knew nothing of my language

[8] For further information, see Craig. Securitys is a Scottish word meaning policemen that Kelman prefers to use it in all of his literature" (100).

yet believed that they did, believed from that ignorance. They were taught that they knew, their familiarity with that language, yet I was the inferior. (320)

The narrator of chapter 13 recounts an incident once happened to an unknown neighboring woman who they block her way home and start making fun of her about being nobody for being of the periphery. They try to sexually abuse her and the narrator stood near her attempting nothing to stop this offense because he feared for his life (Craig 123). The inaction of the narrator brings forth what the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) designates as life drive and the death drive. Every individual uses life drive to survive, and live; whereas death drive is to endanger one's self (Tyson 22). This can explain that the fear that overcomes the narrator is part of his life drive to survive because any confrontation with them is to resort to his death drive and may end in his death.

An even more disturbing crime happens when an aged man tries to avoid the regime police and a bunch of ruling class members after a curfew. He managed to hide but gets caught and murdered without any cause, but before his demise, he sees the killing of an innocent infant taken from his family. This crime resonates in the narrator a wave of disgust and contempt against such an enslaving ideology practiced by the power holders and that monstrous class calling for resistance:

It is we who confront authorities. And who are we. We who may seek. Many colleagues many people. Disinformation and propaganda exist. This has been intensified, now reinforced, and again reinforced. Few among us will have noticed, become moved. Who might be aggrieved if discovering the reality of State control. (78:Ch 8)

To express his feeling, this narrator goes on rambling about how the regime infiltrates the whole society and his people are doomed in that dictatorship kind of government. This, somehow emphasizes and depicts the state of hopelessness and deprivation that the oppressed pass through in that Kelmanesque world which in itself might stand and be a voice for the social and cultural status of many marginalized groups around the world:

Peoples are confronted by all authoritys and agencies, policing bodies, others, military, security, domestic and foreign, whether in the role of defence or prosecution, of judge, jury, executioner, extrajudicial, summarily and always the government as integral state agency, democratically-elected, dutiful-appointed. (79)

Another account is uttered by the narrator of chapter 11 in which an unnamed young boy while heading to his work, he walks like a robot with limited coordinates with head looking forward and fast steps to avoid being caught or questioned by anyone whatsoever. Interestingly, it probably appears that Kelman is familiar with the Audenian literary tradition for a character like that has been introduced in the poem "The Unknown Citizen" (1939) by the British Poet W.H. Auden (1907-1973). The latter portrays a world of an unknown regime in which an anonymous character called JS/07 M 378 works and lives without nagging about anything as if he is a machine deprived of human traits. The end of the poem begs an ironic

question about that character's life condition: "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we [the state] should certainly have heard" (28-29). This reminds the reader that both these characters are not free and happy and they are alienated from their individuality for not having regular human names, thereupon cannot be look at as individual selves. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) states in *psychological Types* (1921) that "The self is our life's goal, for it is the completest expression of that fateful combination we call individuality" (169). In other words, one will not have a self if he has lacks individuality. Actually, the question of the individuality crisis is argued by the narrator of chapter 24 wherein he says that individuality is a consequential human trait that one should preserve and not allow to succumb to the state. However, it is very ironic that the narrator asks for individuality perseverance because he himself is unknown and does not own a name:

The name of an individual is important, I know that it is, but also that what is to do, I know, from myself not from myself, what to do, what I can do, what that I am to do, if I can do it that I shall do it, that I am not obstructing movement, we move ahead, we are to progress, how that is to be doubted, not by myself. (99)

Despite the fact that the whole novel is a plethora of anonymous narratives whereas if the readers are taken into somewhere uncharted, Kelman manages to awaken his readers' consciousness about state aggression in an indirect style of writing. All that has been discussed from regime violation motivates individuals wherever in the world, perhaps to question, protest, and change oppressive or dictatorial ideologies within their nations. As such Kelman's text becomes even more challenging and interesting because everyone might understand the narrative accounts based on how one might relate to them.

Conclusion

With the publication of *Translated Accounts*, Kelman apparently orients the state-individual feud to a more universal and collective perspective varying from other novels as in *A Disaffection* or *How Late It Was, How Late*. However, the threads of Glasgow's voice which is the main interest of his can be noticed indirectly through his unique writing style. As such Kelman has become a literary voice to the voiceless citizens who live under totalitarian regimes bringing a wide range reality into a 54- chapter novel.

Kelman's unconventional literary technique and language trigger the question of individuality and self-construction in a dystopian-like world wherein the characters live in hollowness and yearn to be individuated, having their own independent identity. Psychologically, Kelman succeeds in revealing the ambivalence in taking action and protesting against the privileged class and power structures and how that is developed into fear and anxiety which prevents the oppressed to change their unfortunate reality. Finally, *Translated Accounts* inspired a bunch of postmodernist novels like Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), and Harper

Collins's *Divergent* (2011) to sketch a similar atmosphere of bloodthirsty power holders who create a class and racist based society.

References

Aitkenhead, Decca. (2019, August 15). James Kelman: Why is my work so upsetting for people?. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/29/james-kelman-why-is-my-work- so-upsetting.

Baker, S. (1996). *Studies in Scottish Fiction 1945 to the Present.* New York: Frankfurt and Main.

Bernstein, St. (2018, Sep 19). James Kelman. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (2000).

Bressler, E. (2011). *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Boston: Longman.

Craig, C. (1999). *The Modern Scottish Novel:Narrative and the National Imagination.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Finneran, R. (2008). *Collected Poems By W.B. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan.

Hames, S. (2010). *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Head, D. 2004*Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Kelman, J. (2002).*Translated Accounts.* London: Vintage.

Kövesi, S.(2007).*James Kelman.* Manchester: Manchester UP.

Tyson, Lo. (2006).*Critical Theory Today.* New York: Routledge.

المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تسليط الضوء على شخصيات جيمس كيلمان الروائية من الطبقة العاملة والتي لاصوت لها في عالم حضري متعدد الثقافات .وتؤكد الدراسة على ان هذا الجزء المغمور والهامشي من اسكتلندا هو العامل الرئيسي الذي يشكل واقع اسكتلندا الحديث والمتعدد بطبيعته الثقافية والذي لايمكن تجاهله . وتناقش هذه الدراسة رواية *كيلمان*(حسابات مترجمة)، موضحة كيف ان الجزء الاكثر هامشية من أسكوتلندا يعيش واقعا يخضع لضغط الترهيب والحرمان من حرية الفرد وهويته .وهذا ما تعكسه شخصيات رواية كيمان (الحسابات المترجمة) المهمشة من الطبقة العاملة المحرومة من العدالة الاجتماعية والعيش كريم .من المثير للاهتمام بان كيلمان يجعل من شخصياته وواقعهم المحيط بهم ، شخصيات وواقع غير محددين الهوية ليتناسب مع عالم حضري حيث يلقى المغرمورين منه من الناس تهميش وتمييز طبقي ليؤكد على رسالة مفادها أن اضطهاد الطبقات المستضعفة مازال منتشر في جميع أنحاء هذا العالم .