

THE VOICES OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN IN LITERATURE: A STUDY ON SLAVERY

Femmy Dahlan¹

Abstract: Literary work could portray both the life from the real world and also functions as a media to voice the injustice experienced by certain society. Slavery in America can be seen through three literary works written by Afro-American writers. These three writers describe how slavery had destroyed the lives of the slaves in the Southern part of America. The slaves were treated cruelly by the owners which bring bitterness to them. The lives of the slaves at that time was full of torture both physically and mentally.

Key words: Afro-American literature, injustice, slavery

INTRODUCTION

The first people of African descent were bought to Jamestown, Virginia, by a Dutch man to be sold to the English settlers. Records show that they came as indentured servants rather than slaves and they were free to buy land after their term of services just like any other white indentured servants. Eventually, they were forced into legal slavery in 1661 and another law the following year decided the fate of children born in the colony would be bound or free according to the status of the mother.

The effects of both economic and racial attitudes had driven those English settlers to practice slavery in the New World though England itself had no tradition of slavery. Buying the Negroes for labor force in the plantation turned to be more profitable than employing them as indentured

¹ Femmy Dahlan, S.S., M.Hum is <femmy_dahlan1@yahoo.com> is a full-time lecturer of the Faculty of Humanities, Bung Hatta University, Padang.

servants, since in most cases the planter could recover the original cost of the saving in at least a year by their life time services. Thus, African slaves turned out to be the best deal in economic terms. Another reason to glance at the African was that the English settlers found some difficulties with the Indian slavery of which they have tried at first. As Donald Wright (1990:8) puts it, the Indians never turned out as the planters had hoped. The Indians' familiarity with the environment made them difficult to enslave and those captured were able to escape from their white masters. Furthermore, diseases brought by the Europeans to America could easily endanger their lives resulting in death. On the contrary, the Africans were acquired some immunity to several diseases. Moreover, since the Africans were transported far from home and set down in an alien surrounding, running away could not bring them back home because they could easily be captured, for the color of their skin can distinguish them from the society of planters. Hence, slavery in the South was run not by building fences around or putting watch dogs but left them know nothing, binding and always feel in fear. This is not to say that they never run away yet, escape for them means severe punishment when captured.

The vast majority of Negro slaves lived in the South where they worked in cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane fields. These slaves suffered greatly, both physically and emotionally. Mostly because they were the victims of cruel masters who frequently abused them.

African Americans have contributed a rich and varied body of literature, which have become part of American literature. Since the African were torn away from their native languages and cultures and transported to colonial America they began to use English as a written language of literary expression over two hundred years ago. This can be seen through the works of three important writers such as Olaudah Equiano who was African by birth, Moses Roper a mulatto and Alex Haley the descendant of a kidnapped slave. Olaudah Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African describes* his own experiences as a child who was kidnapped from Africa and the experiences of his fellow slaves. Moses Roper, the son of a planter with a slave gives the picture of his life as a mulatto slave in *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery*. Meanwhile, Alex Haley explains the events

occurring to Kunta and his offsprings from the day he was kidnapped and forced into slavery in *Roots*. Many white writers have written the experiences of black American during slavery from their point of views such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and William Faulkner. This research instead, reveals how black writers illustrate the condition of slaves through the aids of the three works mentioned earlier. The aim of this research is to see the different perspectives seen by black writers on slavery.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

This research utilizes descriptive method. Descriptive method is a method that is used to explain a phenomenon in detail. The data collected concerning the topic being discussed is then analyzed and interpreted in order to get a clear illustration on the miserable condition of the black during slavery.

ANALYSIS

A. Being Kidnapped from Africa

The American slaves are descendants of African Negroes. At first glance these people appear the same without any differences what so ever. In fact, as stated by Wright (1990:12) these African societies differed greatly. They have hundreds of languages and like the Europeans practiced social customs that were as different from one another. They were obtained through kidnapping and selling them into slavery. Since Africa is a big continent with societies living far from each other and very much isolated it gives great opportunities for the slave traders to capture them. The kidnapping occurred not only to the African adults but also to children like what was experienced by Olaudah Equiano and his sister underwent. These two African children were kidnapped during the absence of their parents. Equiano reveals of how they were taken away from home:

One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make

resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood (1972:15).

The slave traders sent people who know the situation of the place to capture the Africans. They waited for the right and exact moment to make the move. The captives were then transported far from their country of origin and placed in a country where they were unable to understand or even communicate with their fellow workers. Ships were provided to transfer these human cargoes across the Atlantic. At first only regular merchant ships were employed yet later special ships were built for transporting slaves. These slave ships were usually long, narrow and there were not much room for the slaves to move since the ship captains packed as many slaves as possible to increase their profit. The slaves were crowded into between decks too low to permit standing. According to Wright (1990: 41) the decks were usually four to five feet high or even lower. Furthermore, a ship was also equipped with "shackling irons" to prevent escape (Wright, 1990: 34). When Equiano was on board the slave ship he witnessed "... a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow..." (1972: 19). The chains did not only keep them at their place but had succeededly turned them into a state of chronic depression. Some of the slaves have lost their lives during the voyage resulting from disease or starvation. Others committed suicide by jumping off as the effect of depression since they found escape impossible when wrists and ankles were bounded with shackles.

Sanitary facilities were inadequate even under the best condition. Thus, to protect the slaves from disease they were washed down and shaved for reason of health. Haley (1976:180) gives a vivid picture of how crews cleaned their slaves.

Then other toubob with long-handled brushes were scrubbing the screaming men. Kunta screamed, too, as the drenching salt water hit him, stinging like fire in his own bleeding whip cuts and the burned place on his back. He cried even louder as the stiff brush bristles not only loosened and scraped off some of his body's crusted filth but also tore open his scabbed lash cuts. He saw the water frothing and pinkish at their feet.

Instead of feeling fresh and clean Kunta suffered from the unbearable

pain when the salt water touched the severe cuts which covered almost every part of his bony body. The scrubbing done by the crews injured the still fresh cuts even worst. It is important to acknowledge that all the slaves had been tortured badly when they were captured. The beating of slaves often continues every single day if the whites find them unagreeable. Without proper treatment the wounded slaves would be full with a life time scars. Some of the slaves take advantage of jumping off the ship while they were brought up to be cleaned. Though they fully conceived that by doing this, death awaits them down the ocean and moreover they would also drag any other slaves being chained to them yet, the anger and the agony of having treated like animals had made them choose this way.

The long distance voyage and the bad weather worsen the condition of these slaves. They had to cope with the horrors of life on the ship when thunder storm strikes and water poured onto the ship and into the decks where they were kept chained to one another. To lessen their suffering the crews would cover any holes above them to shut out the water. This effort not only kept the water out but in doing so they had cut off all air from the outside and trapped the heat in the deck. As a result, the entire rooms became extremely hot and slaves were suffocated from insufficient oxygen.

A. Living in Slavery

After the rough voyage across the Atlantic the slaves faced a completely “new physical, social, and cultural settings” (Wright, 1990: 82). The slaves were apt to be separated from any acquaintances, like Olaudah and his sister, this leads to wilderment and fear of what was to come was expected to be worse. The early experiences were perhaps the most difficult ones. They had to adapt quickly with the new environment because communication was a great problem.

Learning enough English to get by was the first task, like what had been done by Kunta “...he recognized some words... 'oberseer,' 'massa,' and especially 'yessuh, massa.” (Haley 1976:240). Those three words were the most popular and often used among the slaves and the first to be recognized by the new arrivals. *Oberseer* refers to the word overseer, a person who is in charge to control the plantation and especially the slaves. Overseer can be as

mean as the master or even worse. *Massa* is master, the owner of the plantation. *Yessuh, massa* or yes sir master is to be said by the slaves to show respect to the master.

The new arrivals were soon to be sold. The price ranges from low to high depending on the condition of the slaves. Haley (1976:216) in *Roots* describes one of the procedures of the slave trade:

“Top prime young and supple!” the toubob shouted. Kunta was already so numb with error... the toubob crowd moved in more closely around him. Then, with short sticks and whip butts, they were pushing apart his compressed lips to expose his clenched teeth, and with their bare hands prodding him all over-under his armpits, on his back, his chest, his genitals.

The slaves were considered no different than an object, or to be more extreme, like an animal in a trap. They were inspected by the *toubob* (the white) from top to bottom even in their private parts. These people were put on a public auction. The auctioneer displayed them in lines still in chains. Those who bargain the highest price would get the slaves and become his master. Some of the slaves were bought directly by the planters meanwhile others were bought by brokers to be sold again or handling them on commission. For the planters having as many slaves show one's prosperity. They would mortgage their crops to buy more slaves. Besides viewing slaves as the criterion of riches they also regarded slaves as the criterion of social status. A more profitable slaves were young girls and young women for they did most of the same work as men with the purchase not much different to that of men. Women valued primarily as agricultural procedures and as well as bearers of offsprings. The fate of offsprings determined by the mother's status. Since the mothers were bonded, the offspring would become legal property of the planter too. Through this method the planter multiplies their slaves.

It was common for the planters to frequently sell, exchange, or hire their slaves to other planters. The selling of spouses ends marriage between them or the selling of children causes painful separation between mother and child. Once a family was broken up by sale they might not see each other for life. If they managed to find the lost one by way of escape, captivity will haunt them forever. Moses Roper recalls the experience vividly “... and if

possible, in my way, to find my poor mother,... it was not likely that she would know me, having been separated from her when between five and six years old" (1972: 210-211). Roper was separated from his mother at the age of six, since then he strived to find his beloved mother through an escape. At the age of sixteen he came across a girl of six who appeared to be his own little sister. The reunion of this family lasted for a week before he was captured and once again ripped off from his family.

Some of the whites have different opinion to those described by the slaves. They argued that masters sell slaves only under extreme circumstances such as when the master dies slaves are forcefully sold. Furthermore, they added that the masters were attached emotionally to the men and women they owned. In other words, the masters care deeply for those they hold in bondage (Wright 1990:30-37). Perhaps this is true for good masters. Some good masters were reluctant to break up marriages and to separate children from their parents. Yet, however kindhearted a master is he would absolutely prefer his own family over slaves. When it comes to decide whether to give one of his slaves as a gift for his child who starts a new life on her own, which is common at that time, or to break a slave family the master was certain to consider his family first. Haley (1976:361) portrays the circumstances of "unborn black babies being given as presents, wagered as gambling bets at card tables and cockfights". He also explains how a dying master of a pregnant black girl had willed as slaves to each of his five daughters one each of her first five babies. This proves slave is claimed as personal property which could be sold and inherited, or given away. One thing for sure is, the greatest pain of the slaves is caused by the always permanent separation, which usually upon short notice, "from family, friends, and comfortable surroundings" (Wright 1993:36).

A shocking realization is that there is an impression that slave breeding was practiced on plantation and by slave traders. Evidence of such case is revealed by Richard Sutch who states that "they held disproportionately large numbers of women in the child bearing age groups. They encouraged polygyny and promiscuity among their slaves" (quoted in Wright 1993:31). Roper himself recalls of his own acknowledgement, he writes,

The traders here will often sleep with the best-looking female slaves among them, and they will often have many children in the year, which are said to be slave-holder's children, by which means, through his villainy, he will make an immense profit of this intercourse, by selling the babe with its mother. They often keep an immense stock of slaves on (1993:217).

What Roper explains is even worse; women slaves were deliberately raped to breed children. Slaves were regarded as valuable property to gain benefit. The more children they breed the luckier they get even if it means selling their own flesh and blood. It can be deduced that these whites breed slaves just like cattles and then sell them which means separating families for their own purpose.

Sexual abuse exists during slavery; it is a fact which cannot be denied. In their book Carol Hymowitz and Michaele Weissman (1981:51) note that the threat of sexual abuse on female slaves begin as soon as they enter puberty and continues for the rest of their lives, though not all whites encouraged this situation. Sexual abuse of females occurred as the outcome of such system that made black women as the property of white men. It is also essential to know when a slave woman was sold; she would be inspected in the most revolting way so the buyer could look at her. For instance, she was to open her mouth for teeth inspection or she was simply to drop her clothes for body inspection. For those who had not borne a child, her sexual organs will be examined to guarantee she was without fault. Female slaves had no rights to refuse any of those treatments because her body does not belong to her but to the white men. The law that exists at the time was the law of white males which means the female slaves were without protection.

Other suffering of female slaves lies on the heavy burden they have to bear during pregnancy. As Equiano illustrates "They pay no regard to the situation of pregnant women..."(1972: 26). Any given tasks by the masters must be done in time regardless the condition they were in pregnant or not. Hymowitz and Michaele mention the beating of those who could not keep up the work pace. The pregnant slave "was stripped, tied, and beaten for three days in a row by an overseer" (1981: 45). Some of these tortured females were beaten to death. Ironically, as a rule, woman after delivering was allowed to rest for at least four to six weeks to care for the infant.

Slave hiring concerned slave labor is for a fixed period or purpose and usually at a specific price. The demand for temporary labor or the lack of money to purchase slave were reasons for hiring. Above all if one neither owned nor hired a slave, one might be called a poor white. As a matter of fact viewed as poor white is more degraded for them than being a slave because it is the same as being a trash.

Slave who reached a level of competency commonly would meet the standard to be hired out by the master. This is the essence of slavery, the higher the skills of the slave the more money could be earned. Hiring out the slaves will provided additional income for the owner. Some slaves were allowed to hire their own time which means they live, manage for themselves and find their own work yet they must pay the masters fee. For the slave the hiring was much better than sale to a bad master though the wages were lower than the whites for the same work. Hiring goes for both men and women slaves.

The slaves were purchased to do the labor force for life time service mostly for plantation. Yet the labor force here deals with great amount of physical toil the kind of which was out of their expectation. The master would get as much labor from his slave as he possibly could without any wages for the work. They were expected to work from dawn to dusk with breaks only for meals. An overseer was employed to control and "assigning different blacks to a variety of tasks" by the master (Haley 1976:241). Alertness and punishment were required from the master and overseer in handling so many slaves. Punishment is believed by them both as correcting the slave's misbehavior. Such punishments permitted by the law were "branding, flogging, burning, amputation of limbs, hamstringing, and execution" (Wright 1990:99). Little mistakes done by a slave could result in severe torture. A slave who could not accomplish the task assigned to him for any reasons what so ever was not free from punishment such as experienced by one of the slaves; "...tied him up to a tree in the field, and kept him there the whole of that day, and flogged him at intervals" (Roper, 1972:210). This slave died the same day during the night. Since this slave belonged to another master, the person who hired him was compelled to pay the worth of the slave. If he was unable to pay, another person could pay the

debt, in return the debtor will be the overseer of this person. On the other hand, if a master kills their own slaves there was no punishment occur but if a slave kills a master or other white person he was to receive punishment for sure.

A more ruthless punishment will be given to those who dare to escape from slavery. Once they were found there was no way to avoid the cruelty of the master. As stated by Wright (1990: 99) records of punishment towards runaway slaves were quite matter-of- fact. For instance, a minister and his two accomplices beat to death a slave for running away. A slave owner castrated a slave for running away and lying out, cut off the toes of another slave and cut off the ears of a third for stealing. Such descriptions were remarkably revealed in the three works of literature being discussed. Some of them even experienced the punishment themselves.

Kunta in *Roots* had escaped several times ever since he landed his feet on the master's plantation. All he had in mind was to return to his family though he had no idea of where he was or how he was to get home. Kunta saw many black men just like him or whom he called his own people but he could not understand why they only stood by and let the whites treat him badly. At this point Kunta was still ignorant of what was to become of him. He had not realized he was put into slavery yet he knew he must escape from the dreadful people and place. On the night he arrived on the plantation he managed to slip away unnoticed. The very next day though he was captured and rewarded several slashings of whip ad chained to a pole. Unlike the first, the second and the third attempts Kunta's fourth one brought a fatal damage to him. This is how Haley describes the tragedy.

Kunta was screaming and thrashing as the ax flashes up, then down so fast-severing skin, tendons, muscles, bone-that Kunta heard the ax thud into the trunk as the shock of it sent the agony deep into his brain. As the explosion of pain bolted through him, Kunta's upper body spasmed forward and his hands went flailing downward as if to save the front half of his foot, which was falling forward, as bright red blood jetted from the stump as he plunged into blackness (1976:263-264).

Haley's description has proven Wright's statements regarding punishment which permits whites to act brutally on his slaves. The masters

had a reputation of being merciless and inhumane. As seen above Kunta's front part of the foot was chopped off as a sentence for running away.

Similar to African slaves and the creoles, black born in America, a mulatto that is the offspring of whites and blacks, suffer as much as them. No special treatments were given to them. Roper himself is a mulatto. His skin was white yet the hair was curly and wooly. His master was his father. He was sold by his own father, in fact he was frequently sold. Roper was used to getting hundreds of floggings when ever he was captured from his flight. He lived through different kinds of punishments such as having put heavy bars of iron around his feet and heavy log chain around his neck. Another time his finger nails were squeezed off meanwhile the nails of the toes were smashed.

No matter what type or how painful the punishments they will receive, in general slaves were more likely to escape. They flee in the middle of the night through the woods and swim when there is no boat available to cross rivers. This was done without food and by traveling on foot. Light-skinned slaves such as Roper, if they are lucky, pass themselves off as whites and rides horses to freedom.

C. Slave Family

Slave marriage according to Tindal and Shi (1989: 364) had no legal status. Nevertheless, slave owners generally accepted the marriage. The reason for this was because it had stabilizing effect upon life in plantation. When these married slaves have children they were less likely to run away. The marriages were performed mostly by themselves or sometimes they had a minister celebrate a formal wedding. For those who conducted their own ceremony would do a symbolic practice called "jumping the broomstick". This means the couple was married by simply jumping over a broomstick. The origin of this custom was uncertain. An illustration of such wedding ceremony can be seen in the following description:

Kunta and Bell jumped high over the broomstick together, as Bell had forced him to practice over and over the day before. He felt ridiculous doing it, but she had warned that a marriage would

meet the very worst kind of bad luck if the feet of either person should touch the broomstick, and who ever did it would be first to die. As they landed safely together on the other side of the broom, all the observers applauded and cheered... (Haley 1976:348).

This is the wedding ceremony of Kunta and Bell. They had permission to conduct it from Master Walker. In fact, Master Walker and his niece were present on that day. As can be drawn from the narration, not all slaves shared the same custom or belief. Kunta, in this case, is a Moslem. He found it absurd to do such performance but because his wife believed the custom, he followed it reluctantly for her sake.

Unlike Kunta and Bell who belong to the same master, other slaves have spouses outside their plantation. As stated by Hymowitz and Weissman (1981:45-47) wives who live in a separate plantation from their husbands are called broad wives. The husband is usually given a pass to visit his wife during night time on certain days of the week. Without a pass no slaves are allowed to travel any place. Since the men usually live apart from his family, women frequently played the most important roles in child rearing. With the parents working in the fields most of the time, slave children become public property to be *mothered* and *fathered* by anyone who happened to be near.

An interesting occurrence of the relationship between black and white shall not be neglected in this discussion. No matter how much they despise each other as the cause of the bondage, actually special feeling of affection exists between them. This is true in accordance to the children. They often play and eat together without realizing yet the differences between them. As soon as the white children go off to school and learn to read and write they will be aware of their status and situation and the position of their playmates. The white children will know that their play mates are held in bondage and that they are forbidden to learn, unlike themselves. Some white children break the rules and teach their black mate to read and write secretly as experienced by Kunta's daughter.

"Kizzy, have you studied your lesson?" Missy Anne sternly demanded, playing teacher.

"Yes, ma'am," snickered Kizzy.

"Very well, then-what's that"?"...

"It's a D," said Missy Anne. "Now what's this one?"

Almost instantly Kizzy cried triumphantly, "Dat's dat circle, a O!"

Both girls laughed happily.

"Good! You ain't forgot it. Now, what's that?"

"Ah...uh...um..." Then Kizzy exulted, "Dat's G!"

"Right!"

After another brief silence, Missy Anne said, "Now, see that? D-O-G. What's that?" (Haley 1976:434).

With the continuing lesson she receives from her white play mate, Kizzy eventually become a literate black slave unknown to her master. Literate slaves are threat to the masters because with the knowledge they gain through readings, bring difficulty for the masters. The white masters prefer the slaves to be illiterate, ignorant, and dependent on them. Through this way a slave will face difficulty when they escape since they do not know anything or how to survive on their own. Hence, it is important for the white masters to make sure they never learn anything.

The close relationship between a white and a black child bring some advantages for both parties. However, the closeness of slave children with their owner was a "bitter pill for slave parents to swallow" (Hymowitz and Weissman 1981:48). For instance, Kunta feels completely left out as a parent since the whites dominates his daughter. Even worse, his own little daughter enjoys being with the whites more than spending the time with her own folks. Perhaps the affection of the black child towards the white family emerges due to their parents' lack of gifts and luxury which whites could afford to offer. The closeness or the affection between the children will not last long. In the course of time, when the white child enters the age of young adulthood their closeness gradually grow apart.

CONCLUSION

Slavery proved to be economically profitable for the Southern whites. However, it cannot be denied it had only brought bitterness for the black slaves. The Africans are human beings just like any other races in this world, but because of the color of their skin they have been uprooted and alienated

from home and family members to suffer greatly. The whites had regarded them as someone who can be treated like livestock in the most inhumane ways.

The brutal actions of the whites towards the black left a scar in the heart of the black American, a scar that also become the dark history of America. Though the Southern states were making profits from the plantation through the forced labor of the blacks for hundreds of years, nevertheless, their own conduct leads to their own destruction. The luxurious living they were fond of ended through the disagreement between the southern states and the northern states over slavery. The four years of civil war turn the southern white lives upside down just like the shattered lives of millions of slaves in their hands. Because of the institution of slavery both whites and blacks suffered as a consequence.

It can be deduced that the black American writers use literature as a mean to criticize as well as to protest the cruel treatments received from the whites during slavery. Through these three works their generation will realized the kind of lives their ancestors had lived. As for the whites the three works will remind them of their brutality. It can also be concluded that the three works serve as a mental evidence of the American history.

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