



RESEARCH ARTICLE

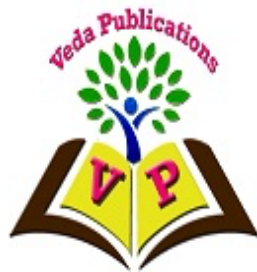


GENDER, RACE AND SLAVERY IN THE SELECT POEMS OF WILLIAM BLAKE

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ABSTRACT



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Besides characterizing the themes of supernatural or imaginative elements, grandeur in natural beauty, and witnessing the beginnings of the sustained British imperial expansion, the Romantic period (1798-1850) also witnessed slavery and racial dominance. The criticism of the slave trade at this age was at its most intense state, finally leading to the formal abolition of the trade in 1807. Between 1680 and 1783, more than two million African slaves were transported to the British colonies alone. Many prominent writers and poets, and several lesser-known authors, expressed opposition to the slave trade through their works. Particularly, poetry became a tool to strengthen abolitionist beliefs and a method to agitate political values. Poets like William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Samuel Coleridge used their literature to fuel abolition. Abolition of slavery was accomplished through the literature of these multiple English writers who took the responsibility and duty of voicing the slaves of their time. This paper examines the relationship between the poetry of William Blake and the notions of slavery in the Romantic era. The poems "The Little Black Boy" (1789) and "The Visions of the Daughters of Albion" (1793) express sympathy with this movement, depicting racial prejudice and oppression in severe ways. However, other aspects of the poems threaten to undercut this message, such as the equation of corruption with black imagery and purity with white imagery. This is a sign of Blake's limited scientific and theological understanding of race, which leads to an inadequate portrayal of the enslaved.

Keywords: *Slavery, Freedom, Abolition, William Blake, Romanticism, Poetry, Racism, Gender.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Romantic era, a period that is marked by a profound break in artistic, literary, and philosophical sensibilities, is a movement that celebrated individualism, emotion, and the sublime beauty of nature. Romantic poets and writers explored themes of nature, love, the supernatural, and the human experience with an intense emotional depth and introspection. The thinkers of this era were highly influenced by significant social and political upheavals, including the French Revolution (1789) and the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840). Among such deep implications was the connection between the Britons themselves and slavery. Slavery among the Romantics acquired a very significant interpretation due to the thoughts and aims of the Romantics and their emancipation. Slavery became a basic theme in Romantic literature, as this theme reflects the viewpoint as well as the reactions of the Romantics towards slavery. In England, slavery was abolished legally in 1772. According to Craton, this was due to the efforts of certain abolitionists who participated a great deal in putting a legal end to slavery, together with certain other events and experiences that pushed the matter forward because they believed that slavery and the slave trade were immoral and should come to an end. The Romantics employ the conception of slavery in several ways and for dissimilar purposes. Debbie Lee says that the utilisation of the images might be for the sake of presenting through them the notion of transformation, to say one identifies the selflessness, or awareness, of another, reinforces one's self-consciousness as well as ethical responsiveness. (Lee, 2004). Certain abolitionists believed that slavery and

the slave trade were immoral and thus should come to an end. They participated in putting a legal end to slavery together with certain other events and experiences. The attitude that there is a difference between blacks and whites and that black people are inferior to white people isn't the view of all people. The British abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson, emphasized the equality of all races and that all human beings are derived from the "same original". Besides, he considered man not a thing to be traded (Kitson, 2000). All through the Romantic epoch, slavery was a problem, as such, England abolished slavery early in the 19th century and the slave trade in 1807. It was only in 1838 that the complete abolishment of slavery was granted to the slaves, and they got their full freedom. The Romantic poets raised images of slavery for the sake of bringing into light slavery as an evil and morally wrong institution, and to think about how the system preserved as well as nurtured those evils. The tropes of isolation and alienation are used only as literary devices by Romantic writers, whereas for slaves or former slaves, these metaphors were "actual rather than figurative traumatic processes of cultural severance and estrangement" (Debbie Lee, 2004).

In the writings of William Blake, slavery is traditionally considered to have come into his philosophy and to have begun to form a major theme in his art and poetry in the early 1790s. Blake sees slavery not only as an African problem but as a state of ignorance of the true ideal Christian charity and brotherhood. For Blake, slavery was also a mental state. Man is central to his vision. According to him, when man restores himself to harmony, the universe and all life will be perfected. Blake believed in racial



and sexual equality. Several of his poems and paintings express a notion of universal humanity. The "The Little Black Boy," which was first published in "Songs of Innocence" in 1789 and "Visions of the daughters of Albion" in 1793, deals with issues of racism and slavery.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To examine Blake's poetry concerning slavery and the slave-trade and to contribute to everyone's learning from his poems about ongoing life struggles. It is also necessary to understand the historical and cultural context of his work throughout the Romantic epoch. In the first poem "The Little Black Boy", the aim is to see how the child of God, that is Human, is discriminated in terms of class hierarchy and skin colour and the second poem, "The Visions of the daughters of Albion", the subjugation of women along with the notion of slavery is questioned.

This paper argues that racism was instrumental in propagating slavery. It also argues that the women of the black community are doubly marginalised. At first, they are being held by the chains of slavery, while on the other hand, they are also subservient to the wicked men of the patriarchal society. These poems contribute to one of the most recent trends in Romantic Literature studies, where critics have started showing interest in the effects of slavery and abolition on Romantic poetry. It works for human liberation relevant to contemporary struggles against oppression and injustice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology of this paper is both analytical and descriptive. It involves a close reading of the primary texts "The Little Black Boy" and "The

Visions of the Daughters of Albion". It involves the various online articles that have been written on the topic, having the theoretical frame of reference on slavery put forward by Aristotle.

DISCUSSION

The great philosopher, Aristotle, in his work, *Politics*, gave the concept of slavery. He describes a natural slave as "anyone who, while being human, is by nature not his own but of someone else". Some people are slaves by nature, while others are slaves solely by law or convention. Keeping these things in record, William Blake published his "Songs of Innocence" in 1798. One of the best-known known to reflect slavery was "The Little Black Boy". Chiramel Paul Jose says, "William Blake, using his skilful touches both with the lines and the images and with the strong allusions to the biblical themes of love, very effectively connives at the supreme importance of bearing with any human beings irrespective of caste, colour and creed which is the basis for peaceful and healthy human co-existence. (Jose, 2017). The Society for the Abolition of the slave trade had been formed in London in 1787, after which hundreds of petitions calling for the abolition had been signed and presented to the parliament. The poem, "The Little Black Boy," was intended to assist this campaign being waged by society. Unlike the other poets who exploit sentimentalism to attack slavery, Blake raises fundamental moral issues in his poetry. The little boy in the poem, despite his gloomy condition, is optimistic as he has been taught to look beyond the immediate present.



*"My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am Black, But O! My soul is white,
White as an angel is the English child,
But I'm black as if bereaved of light."*

(The Little Black Boy, Blake)

Through these lines, the sadness and the hardship of the little boy's earthly position as a black boy are expressed. The "English child" is "White as an angel". In contrast, the African boy is "bereaved of light. It appears that in life, his black skin is associated with death, loss, and grief. He is against his colour since it prevents the world from seeing the "whiteness" of his soul. Blake focuses on the idea that exposure to the sun causes the blackness of the African body.

*"When I from black and he from white, cloud
free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy
I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our father's knee.
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me."*

(The Little Black Boy, Blake)

The 'Cloud' in the poem is the symbolic body, which will 'vanish' when the soul has learned to look upon the face of God. The little black boy's mother tells us that the blackness of their bodies is caused by the sun, which is the source of heat and light, and that this cloud of blackness will vanish on death, and the African child will be redeemed as white. The sun will bring him the ability to face God and bear beams of

love to Christ rather than to shade like the white boy (Gupta,1999). He vows that he will shade his white friend until he, too, learns to bear the heat of God's love. The black boy provides selfless service to the white boy. Blake emphasises the process of transformation that the black boy has to undergo to achieve an equal status with the white boy and to portray the 'whiteness' of his heart. Unlike the black boy for whom freedom and salvation are only possible after death, the white boy does not need to worry about his soul's whiteness. The English boy dominantly represents the white society that instituted slavery. Towards the end, he comes out of his white cloud. Blake believes that the clouds of blackness in the black boy's life will disappear and only the beams of the white soul will remain. The white boy with his angelic features has privileges which the black boy lacks, and so he realises that his salvation is only through his death. Blake says that in heaven, there is no blurriness to be found according to skin colour. The theme of equality of men before God, where heaven is the enlightened society, is strongly prevalent here. The black boy desires to become like the white boy, and this desire remains the same till the end of the poem. The black boy feels that he will be able to make the white boy love him in heaven, not as a playmate or companion, but by serving and also by being like him. Black and white will no longer be there in such a heaven, she argued. Jose (2017) asserted that this naivete and childlikeness of the story is "the pure wisdom which love and generation can teach us." But he also saw wisdom in the black boy's acceptance of his inferior position, and it is "a realization that his very blackness may be made to render service to the tenderer soul that seems so much nearer the light



(Jose,2017). The inferior status of the black boy remains the same in heaven. Blake attempts to portray the true condition of the Black race in the Western world, where a Black man is supposed to follow the 'White' norms to become like a white man.

William Blake's another poem, "The Visions of the Daughters of Albion", celebrates an ambiguous liberty opposed to all sorts of slavery. The poem was written at the climax of the first parliamentary phase, which began in 1789. Blake refers to the fierce political debates of the 1790s concerning the British slave trade, the institution of slavery in the British colonies, and the abolitionist movements. The poem has also been seen as a response to the powerful arguments for the liberation of women put forward by Mary Wollstonecraft in "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" published in 1792. The Daughters of Albion look towards the West, to America, because America holds a promise that one day, there will be an end to all forms of discrimination. Blake recognizes that though America has freed itself from British rule, it continues to practice slavery. The poem begins with the description of the enslaved daughters of Albion, which revolves around the debate on slavery. Oothoon is a female slave who is free in spirit but physically enslaved. Bromion is the slave-master who owns her and rapes her to increase her market value and Theotormon is her lover who fails to recognise her divine humanity. The poem focuses on the love of Oothoon for Theotormon, who is not afraid to enter the space of love. He is captured by Bromion on the way, who introduces Oothoon as a pregnant slave and an escort in the slave market. Theotormon does not come to her rescue but

accuses her of unfaithfulness. Here, Theotormon is the frustrated lover who, being analogous to the abolitionists, cannot bring himself openly to condemn slavery, although both deplore the trade. Oothoon is described as "the soft soul of American plains". Bromion is no simple rapist but the slaver whose claim to "thy north and south" shows his possession in both North and Southern America of African slaves.

"Bromion spoke, "Behold this harlot here on

Bromion's bed,

*And let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely
maid;*

*Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy
north and south;"*

(The Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Blake)

As a slave, Oothoon can be seen urging the British lawmakers to rescue her from the cruel slave owners, and as a woman enslaved by marriage, she is begging her lover to rise above the accusations of adultery because her heart is as pure as it was before. Thus, Oothoon experiences suffering in the hands of both Bromion and Theotormon. The poem suggests different kinds of slavery. The poem progresses with an exploration of the public issues of slavery and female oppression, and a fuller exploration of the plight of women in the social, political, and religious conditions. The poem revolves around the issue of human slavery in any form. Bromion again discards Oothoon by telling Theotormon, "Now thou maist marry Bromion's harlot, and protect the child of Bromion's rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons' time" (The Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Blake). He brands Oothoon by the act of rape



as a harlot just as the slaves were branded by the slave owners. Theotormon is unable to take action against Bromion who has raped his Oothoon and boasted publicly about the wicked deed.

*"At entrance, Theotormon sits, wearing the threshold
hard*

*With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a
desert shore*

*The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children
bought with money*

*That shiver in religious caves beneath the burning
fires*

*Of lust that belch incessant from the summits of the
earth"*

(The Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Blake)

Theotormon's behaviour is also analogous to that of the slaves. He sits "Upon the margined ocean conversing with shadows dire," considering his relation as if trapped in the metaphorical caves that are apparent. He cannot overcome the socially gathered awareness that is indoctrinated from society's institutions, "conversing with shadows". Symbolically speaking, the cave stands for entrapping cultural ideologies of gender, keeping them chained to their principles since they cannot emancipate themselves. He is still unable to reconcile her "defiled" state (Haraj, 2020). He can be compared with that of the society whose aim was not emancipation, but only the end of the slave trade. The poem appears as a social criticism of all sorts of property or ownership, be it slavery, marriage, or sexual jealousy. Women and slaves have been the victims of such oppression therefore, the criticism

can be taken as a claim for liberation. Blake puts forward the definition of slavery that includes not only all women but all human beings whose liberty of desire and imaginative vision is subordinated to a powerful colonisation, religious or economic system. Blake's primary concern in "The Visions of the Daughters of Albion" is not just to end the slave trade or the institution of slavery in the colonies but to liberate the "Daughters of Albion" from the slavery they experience at home.

*"Why does my Theotormon sit weeping upon the
threshold*

*And Oothoon hovers by his side, persuading him in
vain?*

I cry, "Arise, O Theotormon, for the village dog

*Barks at the breaking day, the nightingale has done
lamenting."*

(The Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Blake)

Here, Oothoon is aware of the revolutionary change that has taken place and is working in favour of liberty. Blake is referring to the French Revolution. This brief study has shown Blake's concern with slavery. Such symbolic characters as Oothoon express his welcome of radical change, which he hopes will destroy social ills, particularly slavery. Her issue is an issue of liberty and emancipation from any kind of enslavement. Thus, the solution for Blake is through emancipation from enslavement, especially for women, and this is to be achieved through one's "Cry, Love! Love! Love! Happy, Happy Love! Free as the mountain wild!" (The Visions of the Daughters of Albion, 1793). The solution for Blake is love because it (free love) might lead to the Platonic view of the soul.

**CONCLUSION**

His poems uphold the idea of equality and universal humanity. His attempt to counter slavery and racism through his works during a period when slavery and the slave trade were important components of the Western world can be seen as a very positive and emancipating contribution. These poems put forward a cruel picture of slavery and their sufferings. The Black Boy wants to become like the White boy. Similarly, Oothoon suggests the concept of free love as a solution for all her sufferings. The Western concepts and notions remain dominant here. But despite such problematic ideas, one cannot ignore Blake's criticism of slavery and racism. His ideas are highly sympathetic towards the conditions of the slaves, and his works undoubtedly throw light on their sufferings and uplift their marginalised position. His works remind us of the importance of challenging dominant ideologies and fighting for our worth and dignity.

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