

Negro Spirituals: Identity and Liberation

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I would like to consider 'Negro Spirituals' from the point of view of a politics of identity and resistance with the hope of liberation. St. Paul in the letter to the Romans Chapter V theorizes the trajectory from suffering to hope saying that suffering leads to endurance which in turn leads to character and finally to hope. I try to chart the journey of the Negro Spirituals in this paper according to the pattern set down by St. Paul. I will also bring in elements of sociolinguistics and social bonding as essential ingredients of the Spirituals. I hope to show that people together can change their destiny through cultural action, even when it seems hopeless to fight back.

The term 'Negro Spirituals' seems to be a paradox forcing one's attention to the fact that the Negro also has a spiritual existence. Though one is disconcerted by the term 'Negro' today, as a politically incorrect term; the marker of history and identity is carried forward by these juxtaposed words. The fact that the African-American was used for 'brawn value' and had no 'spiritual value' is an irony to say the least. It also implies that the ones who valued them as mere chattel were mercantile and had no spirituality themselves. Responding to the schema *De Fide* of the First Vatican Council, "Bishop Verot of Savannah in Georgia, USA, expressed the opinion that instead of refuting the obscure errors of German idealists it would be much more to the point to condemn the notion that Negroes have no souls." (Jedin: 1960: 205).

From all classical notions of 'spirit' as opposed to 'flesh' the contradictions are even greater on closer examination. (Porter: 2003:28-43). As Marx would draw on the connection and gap between the 'base' and 'superstructure' (Williams: 1991: 408-10) one can perhaps see where the spirituality of the slave owners came from. It was this feigned spirituality that got reinscribed in the flesh in what turned out to be the 'Negro Spiritual.' Perhaps the Word 'reincarnated' might be appropriate here to draw out the paradox and the re-enactment of the 'Nativity Narrative.'

'The Word' becoming flesh in the Negro Spiritual or in the lives of the 'African-American' however, is not the neat sonorous reading that is oft repeated in Churches that are aesthetically pleasing. It is the tortured body which perhaps is constantly made to remember that it is body without spirit, devoid of all elements of being human and humiliated beyond all measure. Whether it is the body of the slave or the tortured Christ it seems as if there is no difference or separation. 'Brawn value' and 'womb value' notwithstanding, the productivity of the body was limited to the turn out for material expansion, and status of the slave owners. 'The Word' as written text was denied to Negroes because liberation would be possible if education was available leading to imbalance in the hegemonic structure of slavery (Douglass: 1997:50-51). It was the word as spoken which took root in the minds of the slaves over a period of time and the creative retelling of 'the gospel' (good news) in the lives of tortured bodies and broken spirits which shows how liberation can work in spite of hegemony and near totalitarianism.

'What does the Word do at a socio-cultural level?' is a question that might be worth asking. Here one has to recall the fact that 'the Word' was in an alien tongue, English, that was perhaps unintelligible to the early African-American slaves (Du Bois: 2003:182). Church music which was perhaps the Mass of Bach and other classical composers, acquired an equally unintelligible status to them. What would they have understood of four part harmony, or phrasing, or even the 'Order of the Mass' as 'Breaking of the Word' and 'Breaking of Bread'? (Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42, 2:46, 20:7). These unintelligible ingredients, got transformed into the Negro Spirituals and had the effect of uniting the slaves as fellow sufferers.

The traces of memory draw a connection to what was their African musical past (Du Bois: 2003:180-181) and the Biblical narratives spoke of liberation of slaves both physically and metaphorically. It is the metaphorical, which in being captured, confirms their humanity and spirit and defeats all those who considered their brawny productivity. The linguistic works itself out into a sociolinguistics of community that can

be consolidated by metaphor from an alien culture, religion and language. This speaks of human experience as similarity and is an assertion of the power of the literary and linguistic. This linguistic and literary bridge could be considered as celebratory over the oppressiveness of political and economic power. The Negro Spirituals in many ways confirm that such a phenomenon is possible, though it would take nearly a century and more for this to be transformed to political assertion, in historical and concrete terms. At this stage it seemed that all hope was lost just as the Biblical narrative tells of the Apostles who deny Jesus and are too afraid to even agree that they knew Him. (Matthew 26:33-35, Mark 14:29-31, Luke 22:33-34 & John 13:36-38.) The Negro Spiritual 'Old Folks at Home' or 'Swanee River' talks of going back to 'linger and die' which shows that there is no hope any more, just brutal toil and suffering and death at the end of it all. But the song also has the element of family which didn't exist for many of the slaves as they were actually treated as cattle which were bred and fed on the minimum. (Douglass: 1997: 42). Often the families were broken by slave traders and the notion of family identity was lost. (Douglass: 1997: 20).

The images of family, perhaps were not experienced but in the imagination, which held a hope out to them (Du Bois: 2003: 183-184). It is perhaps that they derived these elements from the families of the masters who seem happy as Toni Morrison shows much later in *the Bluest Eye* (Morrison: 1970). I would not like to claim memory here as one does not know exactly what the notions of family were, from where they came. (Du Bois: 2003: 182). It is important however to recall that there existed the seeming matrilineal family along with the practices of displacing and breaking up family ties by the oppressive slave owners for purposes of control. However, the proximity of the nuclear family of the white slave owner probably sought an image of family to be desired, and even if not hoped for; a kind of grafted notion of family in memory. I think one should consider that the real family did not exist as it is in the Negro spirituals; the signified is absent here and only the signifier (Derrida: 1963) asserts a past and a future which perhaps never was and may never be. Yet, the fact that such images unite and are circulated in song, reinforce a notion of being which seems absent at the present

moment. The unity to see that such an image becomes a reality is what is common, and becomes a uniting force, if not of hope, at least of endurance for the people who suffer. Going back to a mother who would never be able to recognize a child, belies the notion of family. However, the spiritual affirms that there is an earthly mother that one would like to go home to. Thus images of 'home' 'family' and 'mother' are linguistic and imagistic literary devices that not only make the song cohere, but also the slave collective whose sufferings both physical and mental are somewhere finding a commonality of experience. And the notion of enduring in spite of suffering is there behind these images and notions.

It is possibly easy to imagine that considering the Negro Spirituals as peasant songs implies the intangible union with peasants all over the world. Yet the notion of the connectivity and such links between people did not exist and in all probability were not available to the slaves at that point of time. Such organization was not permitted under slavery as any kind of unification would spell the death of slavery. However, the give away was the biblical narrative, which is a slave narrative and shows how one strives for freedom through community, anticipating Marx and unionism. The white slave owners had been insensitive, or blind, to the narrative that they were exposing the slaves to, or perhaps presumed too hard—or too easily—that 'brawn' had no spirit, that the slaves were not human and could not think. They had in fact hardened themselves to the 'Word of God' or else they would have realized how inhuman and unchristian they were. At the same moment one must realize that the Bible as a piece of literature and as a slave narrative is read creatively by the slaves even though available to them only in the spoken form. Ironically, what was written gets transformed to the oral and is transmitted through the medium of song.

The reinforcement of the tunes, which are seemingly simple, or folksy, and have perhaps the rhythm of the worker in the cotton fields, calls for a sociolinguistic reading that the phenomenon provides. The reiteration, rendering, consumption and dispersal of both images and tunes as a cohesive identitarian device of the songs, no doubt, call attention to

themselves. The songs themselves bring in a unity by being sung in unison, this is reinforced in a multilayered manner as the images, the diction, the dialect, the intonation and the suffering proclaim a shared identity. The songs also are not suicidal in nature and speak of the sufferings that have been endured by those of the past and those in the present. Any kind of allusion to suicide would be detrimental to endurance and fortitude, and the spirituals as peasant songs and slave narratives are designed to bring in fortitude, and strength. There is no possibility of striking and the momentum and rhythm of the song parallels the momentum and rhythm of physical labour. Strength is reinforced both physically and mentally by this repetition. This in ordinary terms gives rise to endurance and defines the character of people. The Negro Spiritual performing these seemingly ordinary tasks of developing an identity and character around a few songs also is cataphoric and points to a future (Nicholson: 2008:113).

The fact that there is a future for those whose was 'dark and dreary everywhere' they went, itself is a way of rewriting or rescripting of the self of a people. It is not saying only that they will die and be forgotten or consigned to the earth but that they will have a home in heaven as the Spiritual envisages in 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot.' The question of endurance, leads to a toughness of spirit and a conviction that no matter how badly they are mangled and tortured, they will not only survive but endure. It is true that from a material point of view they could see the decimation of their people. But what was important was that they considered themselves one people and had an identity, racial though it be. The Negro Spirituals fed both on their identity and into building up their identity and their aspirations about themselves.

This hammering home of images, rhythms, aspirations and dreams maintained their identity and helped in an imagining that would see them in the future as a tortured people who would be free and one some day. It was important that they thought of themselves as the chosen people and rewrote *the Bible* in their imagination to think of themselves as the Israelites who had Moses to go and tell Pharaoh to set them free as in the

spiritual ‘Go Down Moses.’ Who was Pharaoh in a democratic land? He certainly was not the President of the United States. If it is true that we live by myths, it was this mythic belief of being free which was certainly what helped them cement their identity and build on it. There was the Black English which was a creolized form of English that they used, which was also a factor that helped in their identity formation, besides their skin colour that figures so prominently in songs like ‘What Colour is God’s Skin?’ and ‘Old Black Joe.’ If we consider the material ties that bound them again we find that the black bodies, the language, and the songs were important identitarian factors that bound them together but more importantly the notion of being a political body of people who wanted freedom from slavery was an identitarian element that was not purely material and was articulated in an unseen and un-crafted manner.

It might have seemed foolish to consider them a political body when they did not even count as human beings and had no rights at all in a democracy as citizens. At the same time it was a faith that they would overcome no matter what happened because they had suffered and profited from their sufferings; they had learnt to endure, and that had built their character as a strong people who could withstand the yolk of the oppressor. One can look at this in terms of sheer human bonding and a process of coming together. The Negro Spirituals documented that process to reiterate who they were and where they were going in the journey of liberation.

One might like to consider the process linked to language. The element of Creolized Black English transformed them, their struggle and their being into a transcendental identity across space and time. It made them one with all those who suffered, endured and were liberated. This was the same language that *the Bible* used more than two thousand years before them.

I think it might be important to consider that *the Bible* as a work of literature can be read in different ways. It is indeed a marvel that in spite of not having direct access to reading, the oral mode and oral narratives

as song got implicated in the process of liberation. What is also interesting is that hermeneutics (a complex method of understanding symbolic and historical religious codes) got transmitted without training to unpaid slave labourers, who were illiterate for the most. I do not attribute this to something supernatural but to socio-political factors of human beings who are oppressed. However, the system of slavery was not foolproof, and since not every one was a slave owner, the totalizing effects were dampened. It must also be remembered that the slave owners differed in many ways from each other, and the treatment of the slaves and the reading of the Bible (Douglass: 1997:41). That some of them looked at the slaves in the way the Bible looked at the oppressed can not be ruled out. However, that the negro spirituals as peasant songs were not forbidden as a threat to those in power should perhaps be noted. The power of song which requires no advanced technology but provides a tool of unification, identity and transformation is also worth observing.

The character of the songs was linked to the character that suffering and endurance provide to the experience of the slaves. The spirituals assert faith in God and in the fact that things will change. This is a politics of hope. This hope of liberation, as we see from the songs is tied up to the notion of Heaven and freedom from the sorrows of the world in Heaven. This hope, while rooted in the experience of the African-American, transcends the bounds of personal experience and becomes an expression for all those who believe and suffer in the world, though their sufferings might not exactly be the sufferings of slavery but oppression. This is what makes the Negro Spirituals popular and perhaps an utterance of faith for those who sing it meaningfully. The repetition of the songs instills a faith in the ones who sang it.

St. Paul does not talk about faith directly but talks about a rational process of deriving something as positive as hope from suffering. He does not allude to an irrational faith in political liberation but a process of people who suffer and endure together. The notion of the individual does not really figure here, but the idea that the individual is liberated along with a group of similarly oppressed people, together. This is indeed remarkable

as it alludes to a philosophy of liberation which is a rational social process that the African-American slaves undergo.

While 'hope' and 'faith' are important Christian virtues, this paper has tried to argue that there is a rationale to faith and hope. While one looks at the notion of 'cultural resistance' and ways of resisting oppressive cultures in power, one can see that the Negro Spirituals are one such way of resisting the culture of slavery. Their faith and hope are not in the realm of fantasy but are grounded in shared action and being together against the oppressor in song.

References

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