

“Curiosity is Unbecoming in the Female Sex”: Resisting the Notion in Manu Herbstein’s *Ama* : *A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*

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Abstract

The notorious transatlantic slave trade has given birth to hundreds of slave narratives. Along with the historical and classic slave narratives, mostly first-person accounts of former slaves like Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) and Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-1897), there are fictional neo-slave narratives like Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) that emerged mainly after WWII. Penned by a white male author Moritz Isaac (“Manu”), Herbstein's fiction *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (first published in 2000) is a much later engagement with the theme of transatlantic slave trade. This result of Herbstein's meticulous research is no less than a historical document as it tells the unheard tale of Nandzi or Ama, one among the thousands of black women, the worst victims of the slave trade. Like the other female slaves, she is abducted, enslaved, tortured, raped and torn apart from her near and dear ones. Unlike most of the slave narratives, *Ama* takes into account the entire journey of the slave girl, from her village to the Asante Kingdom, from there to the Dutch coastal outpost and eventually to the Brazilian plantation. This highly nuanced and complex novel not only gives a realistic and horrific picture of the slave trade but deals with the issues of language and education as tools empowering the female slave. By mastering the very language(s) of the white men, a black female slave Ama, doubly marginalized by patriarchy and colonialism, talks back and curses her oppressors. By acquiring the secular knowledge of the West, she is able to argue rationally. What starts as a kind of experiment by her owner De Bruyn, Ama's secular education eventually arms her against her oppressors. As an interpreter and translator, she gains a unique power of twisting information and hiding or revealing information according to her needs. This helps her uniting the African slaves against the slave traders. Surprisingly, it is the language of the oppressor that becomes a tool for preserving the African identity of the slaves and their culture. A common European language like Portuguese also helps creating solidarity among the African slaves of various ethnicities and linguistic groups who could never have been able to communicate otherwise. What is intended to be a bane for the slaves becomes a boon for them. *Ama* also stages the debate between the slave

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owners regarding the education of a slave, particularly distinguishing secular knowledge from “Bible literacy,” the latter meant to create meek and docile subjects.

Key words: Atlantic slave trade, neo-slave narratives, black female slave, language, literacy, Bible literacy, secular knowledge, interpreter, resistance, rebellion, plantation, solidarity, African identities, African cultures.

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, some twelve million enslaved Africans, men, women and children, were ferried across the Atlantic by European slave traders. Most of these people were captured in endemic warfare between the African states. Powerful African kingdoms like the Asante were built upon slavery and they were also engaged in selling the excess slaves to the European slave traders. After these slaves were purchased in exchange of European goods, they were transported like cargo to the New World. There, they were again sold to the planters to work like beasts in various plantations. In the long process, most of the captured Africans were inhumanly tortured, kept in dungeons, manacled like wild beasts, losing their identities and even their African names. The slave owners and slave traders, however, preferred to keep their slaves illiterate and ignorant. Though they wanted their slaves to be able to read and interpret the Holy Book of the Christians, most of them ‘hoped to shield their slaves from the liberating aspects of literacy.’¹ What the slave owners wanted was to create a large multitude of docile, god-fearing, meek and servile subjects who would neither talk back nor fight back. A few of the owners, however, would prefer to teach their slaves to read and write, and the basics of science and secular knowledge. But in case of a female black slave, doubly marginalized by the mechanisms of patriarchy and colonialism, literacy and education was a far-fetched dream. Manu Herbstein’s self-published fiction² (This ‘portmanteau word’ is used for fiction the basis of which is some fact or reality), *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, is one of the few well-researched documents of the journey and lives of female slaves from Africa. An extraordinary story of an otherwise ordinary black girl, torn off from her family at a tender age, brutally raped several times, tortured and blinded, Ama does not succumb to the pressures of colonialism and patriarchy. It is by mastering the white man’s language that she curses her oppressors and talks back. It is through

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her education and her acquiring the secular knowledge of the enlightened Europeans that she is able to argue logically, to question and to critique her situation. Using her mastery of the European languages, Ama acts as an interpreter between the White masters and the black slaves. In this way, as an interpreter, she acquires an extraordinary power and instigates a rebellion. It is her ability to read and write that would later help organizing another rebellion in Bahia. This paper intends to explore the issue of the slaves’ and particularly the female slaves’ literacy and education, the debate among the European slave owners regarding this issue, how an ordinary and illiterate black girl can use the very European language and education to talk back, to fight back and to keep alive her own identity as a black, an African and a woman.

Herbstein’s *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (2016) is often considered a ‘neo-slave narrative, an African-American genre that investigates the history of slavery and reworks the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition.’³ The term “neoslave narratives” (without the hyphen) was first coined by Bernard Bell to refer to the ‘residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom.’⁴ In ‘Neo-Slave Narratives in Contemporary Black British Fiction,’ Sofia Muñoz-Valdivieso points out that it has now become an umbrella term ‘to describe all contemporary novels about slavery.’⁵ But she also says that ‘it alternately has a more restrictive meaning introduced by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy where these are ‘a particular kind of slavery fiction, those that recreate the first-person narrator of the original texts written (or dictated) by the former slaves themselves.’⁶ Among the neo-slave narratives are Chicago Black Renaissance writer Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), U.S. writer William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), African-American writer Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), American novelist Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison’s much-acclaimed novel *Beloved* (1987), Edward P. Jones’ *The Known World* (2003) and Noni Carter’s *Good Fortune* (2010) to name only a few. If *Dessa Rose* is based on two historical figures, a black female slave and a white woman who helps slaves, *Beloved* is based to some extent on the African-American slave woman Margaret Garner; *Jubilee* is based on the author’s own great grandmother, and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is based on the rebel slave Nat Turner’s life. *Ama*, though not exactly based on, but is inspired by female slave leaders like

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Zeferina and Luiza Mahin. Like Ama and Tomba in Herbstein's faction, the Black slaves Zeferina and Antonio led revolts in Brazil and were eventually captured and punished. Mahin, in the words of Dawn Duke, 'represents secrecy, mass organization and unity among the Male, Bantu, Gege and Nago' and is 'an icon of resistance to enslavement, fearlessness, war and freedom.'⁷ Unlike most of the other neo-slave narratives, *Ama* takes into account the entire journey of a black female slave. It realistically portrays the life of a slave girl in African Asante Kingdom, in the Dutch coastal outpost, the life on the ship and in the plantation. In *Ama*, Moritz Isaac ("Manu") Herbstein assumes the role of the historian who presents the mini-narrative of a black slave girl, a narrative which is excluded from the official grand narratives of history. Herbstein's novel is unique and highly nuanced as it deals with the complex aspects of language and literacy among slaves.

Ama is a tale of a remarkable African girl, a victim of the inhuman and notorious transatlantic slave trade. A sixteen year old Bekpokpam girl, Nandzi, is abducted by Abdulai, the commander of the Bedagbam slave raiders and his cohorts. Her lover, Itsho, leads an attack on the camp of the raiders and is killed in the fight. The image of Itsho's mangled corpse would haunt Nandzi throughout her life. Nandzi is then taken to Kumase, the Asante capital. There she is given as a gift to the Queen-mother or Asantehemma, Konadu Yaadam. The Asantehemma renames her Ama. When, after the demise of the Asantehene or king Osei Kwadwo, the adolescent and inexperienced Kwame Panin is made the Asante king, Ama enters into a sexual liaison with the boy king. Though the adolescent king admits that it is he who has seduced Ama, it is Ama, who, according to the Asante rules, has to be sacrificed. Her death sentence, however, is commuted to transportation through the intervention of Koranten Péte, commander of the central division of the Asante army and the Asante consul in Yendi, where Ama was previously taken. As per her transportation, Ama is taken along with several hundreds of other slaves to the Elmina Castle of the Dutch West India Company in West African shore. After the initial humiliation, she is chosen by Pieter De Bruyn, the Governor of the Company. De Bruyn, however, starts teaching Ama to read and write the English language with the help of the chaplain, Schalkwyk. In the course of time, Ama, now named Pamela after the name of Samuel Richardson's heroine, becomes an intellectual companion to De Bruyn and

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he decides to marry her and take her to Europe with him. Immediately after returning from his last sea-trip to a Dutch coastal outstation, aged De Bruyn dies of yellow fever and his successor Jensen becomes the new Director-General. Jensen, devoid of any humanity, immediately dismisses De Bruyn’s last will as forgery and sets it on fire. With the burning of the will, Ama’s hope of freedom comes to an end. Jensen brutally rapes Ama and sends her again to the female dungeon. Violated and humiliated, Ama is now taken to the English slave ship, *The Love of Liberty*, bound to Barbados. When Williams, the Captain of the ship, recognizes Pamela, he appoints her as the interpreter or translator for Butcher, the surgeon of the ship. Since both parties cannot understand each other’s language, Ama uses her mastery of the European language and her new gained power as an interpreter to instigate a slave rebellion with the help of the illiterate but indomitable slave leader Tomba. As the rebellion comes to an end, Ama, along with the other rebels, is severely whipped and as a consequence, she loses an eye. In mid-Atlantic, *The Love of Liberty* comes in the fierce grip of a terrible storm and is driven to the port of Salvador, the capital of Brazil, instead of Barbados. Here she has to work in a sugar plantation and develops friendship with many other African slaves. Surprisingly, it is the Portuguese language that helps them to know each other and to develop solidarity amongst the African slaves belonging to different African nations. Ama gets hold of a Portuguese Bible and instead of believing each and every word of the Holy Book, she starts critiquing and questioning the purposes and ways of the white men. Ama’s ability to read and to write becomes useful again in communicating with other literate slave leaders in different plantations. Here she is reunited with Tomba. They marry and Ama gives birth to a boy child. When she is again raped, this time by Jesus Vasconcellos, General Manager at the *Engenho de Cima*, after the death of the Senhor, Tomba avenges her rape and murders Vasconcellos. During their final hideout, the slaves are captured and their rebellion is nipped in the bud. Tomba is finally executed and Kwame, Ama’s only son is raised by Miranda, the daughter of the Senhor, and Williams, her English husband. It is many years later, when Ama has lost her eyesight totally, that she recounts the story of her life to Kwame, now a free man.

In spite of having a rich storehouse of folklores and mythical and moral tales which are passed from generation to generation among the members of the tribes, the Africans slaves were considered bush people not only by

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the White colonizers and slave traders but also by the powerful African nobles such as those belonging to the Asante Kingdom. As the story progresses, Ama realizes that their stories are no less than those contained in the Christian Bible. Their cultures, however, were spoken and not written.⁸ The Europeans, on the other hand, had, for several centuries, developed a rich system of reading and writing. It is their superior knowledge of science and geography that led to numerous sea voyages and discovery of new lands like the Americas which gave birth to the slave trade and slavery. When Ama is on the way to Elmina Castle, after her death sentence is commuted to transportation, a storyteller tells a mythic tale of how the white people ascended to supremacy over the centuries, whereas the Africans were relegated to the status of inferior bush people. According to the tale, Onyame, the creator in the Akan scheme of things, in the beginning, created three black men and three whites. As companions, Onyame provided each man with a woman of the same colour. The six blacks are considered the first ancestors of the black people and the others the ancestors of the white people. Then Onyame set before them 'a large clay pot and a piece of paper, folded and sealed' and made both parties draw lots. As the black "men" won, they were given the first choice. After discussing for a while amongst themselves, the worldly and materialistic black men found the paper to be of no material value and chose the pot instead. Inside it they found a piece of gold and a piece of iron. Now when the white men's turn came, 'they opened the paper and examined it' and 'it told them everything there was to know.' After that Onyame gave the blacks "this country"(Africa; though at that time, the creators of these stories did not have any idea about the map of Africa or the span of the continent) to live in the bush. Those who selected the paper, on the other hand, were taken to the mouth of the "great water", taught to build a ship. When the ship was ready to sail, the whites boarded it and sailed away to a faraway land prepared by Onyame. Such stories no doubt reflect the despair of many Africans who, because of their status as a bunch of illiterate subhuman superstitious bush people, were being sold to the white slave settlers and treated as cargo. As the story suggests, though the Europeans were also barbarian foresters at the beginning, they gradually developed great European civilizations by acquiring, nurturing and transmitting knowledge of various kinds, and, most importantly, by their ability to read and write. As the storyteller says, it is 'from that paper that

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they had learned to make the goods.’⁹ It is those goods which the descendants of the first whites came to exchange for gold and slaves when they returned to Africa many years later.

Though African culture is in no way inferior to the Western culture, it is true that Africa did not, at the time when the story is set, enjoy the marvels of science and the superior lifestyle and amenities that many Europeans were enjoying at that time because of the advent of European modernity with scientific inventions, geographical explorations and rapid industrialization and urbanization. Another improved civilization which was even closer to Africa was the Islamic civilization of the Arab world. In fact, a large portion of Africa was converted to Islam and the history of interaction between the two civilizations is even longer. Even before the arrival of the Portuguese to the shores of Africa in the sixteenth century, the Arabs used the African slaves for their own benefits. When Ama is in Kumase, the Asante capital, the adolescent king Kwame Panin gives weekly audience to the Muslim clerics who ‘told him gripping stories from their Holy Book and the Tales of a Thousand and One Nights, preparing the ground for ambitious future projects.’ It is in Kumase that Ama first encounters, with open-mouthed wonder, the act of writing. For her it is almost a kind of magic or wizardry. As Sharif Imhammed produces ‘a long white feather’ and appears to ‘slice of the end of the quill at an angle with a sharp knife,’ Ama and her friend Esi exchange ‘incredulous stares.’ We see this act of writing through the eyes of Ama, one who, coming from a society which do not have any script or system of writing of their own. As Ama watches, Imhammed begins to chant in a strange and unfamiliar language and as he does so, he holds ‘the feather in the space between the thumb and first finger of his right hand’ and begins to “scratch” a board with it. She becomes more and more curious but can ‘make nothing of the twists and curls.’ This man, able to read books, chant and writing appears to be a magician to the assembled crowd of illiterate Africans. There is ‘a murmur of awe at the man’s secret knowledge.’¹⁰

What is worth noting in the story told by the unnamed storyteller at the camp is that it is only the men who are made to draw their lots and allowed to make decisions thereafter. It is the white males who get the privilege to learn reading and writing. If the white males are the most privileged of the groups, it is the black females, who are the most deprived, wretched and oppressed. Doubly marginalized by both patriarchy and colonialism, they

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are relegated to the status of the subalterns, who are neither allowed, nor have the means of voicing their protests, arguments and opinions. Though the white females were in a much better position, most of them were deprived of formal education and schooling which their male counterparts used to enjoy.

Pieter De Bruyn, the Director-General (Governor) of the Dutch West India Company at Elmina Castle, no doubt has endless supply of female slaves who would satiate his carnal desire. But the widower De Bruyn, leading an emotionally barren life in the godforsaken land, far from his native country and with a few educated and well-read friends and acquaintances, is in search of a female companion with whom he can share his ideas and feelings. The moment Ama's naked body is exposed before him, he chooses the young African girl as his concubine. Since they share not a single word in common, communication becomes problematic: 'They lay naked together under the sheet, her head on his chest, and spoke to one another, neither understanding a word of the others language and laughing at their mutual incomprehension.' As she 'neither speaks nor understands a word of Dutch, nor ... any other civilized tongue,'¹¹ De Bruyn can converse whatever he wishes in Ama's presence, with his friend, Hendrik Van Schalkwyk, Minister of the Dutch Reformed Church.

It is Schalkwyk who first suggests that De Bruyn should consider teaching his Pamela (Ama) 'to read, perhaps even to write and figure arithmetic.' He is confident that Ama would soon pick up Dutch from De Bruyn, indeed, probably more quickly than any white would be able to learn Fanti. For Schalkwyk, it would be 'an interesting experiment.' As he is taken aback by Ama's intelligence (she seems to have mastered the game of chess just by watching a single game), something unthinkable in a black woman, Schalkwyk wants to see how much she can absorb and how quickly. Schalkwyk, however, suggests that De Bruyn himself could take the responsibility of teaching Ama. She could simply read to De Bruyn and in the course of time, learn the English language. Though he cherishes the idea suggested by his friend, De Bruyn immediately dismisses any such possibility: 'I am no schoolmaster and I would not have the time.' What he fears is the possible consequences of such an experiment. If the news that the Director-General is 'teaching a slave girl to read and write'¹² reaches the ears of the Dutch monarchs, anything might happen. Strictest measures might be taken against him for doing such a thing.

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De Bruyn, therefore, assigns the task of teaching Ama English (and not Dutch) to Schalkwyk. The sexually starving Schalkwyk immediately accepts this responsibility as he anticipates ‘with secret joy the prospect of spending several hours each day with Pamela.’ De Bruyn, on the other hand, though he has chosen Ama primarily for using her as a sex machine, has a different intention: ‘What use is a good book, if you cannot share your pleasure in it with another?’¹³

Most of the European slave owners wanted to keep their slaves in an illiterate and ignorant state. Some of them, however, would encourage teaching their slaves to read and write. As Regan Garey observes in his post “Literacy among Slaves,” one of the reasons behind this was that of religious enlightenment. These owners wanted their slaves to be able to read and interpret the Bible. This is known as “Bible literacy”, or in the words of Garey, ‘the level of reading that could be attained under religiously inspired teaching by the whites.’¹⁴ They would, however, not allow their slaves to read the secular books which would promote critical thinking and inspire them to question the existing order. If we focus on the text, we will find that the moment Schalkwyk thinks the prospect of educating Ama, he is happy to think that a pagan bush girl like Ama, in the course of time, ‘might be brought to receive the grace and salvation of Our Lord.’¹⁵ The most important book that Schalkwyk takes from Rev. Philip Quake, the chaplain at Cape Coast castle, for Ama as Quake’s personal gift or ‘the prize,’¹⁶ is an English Bible, *The Authorised Version of King James the First*. Schalkuyk then becomes obsessed with ‘using education as a tool for spiritual progress.’ As Ama is able to recite the Lord’s Prayer by heart and to memorize the Articles of Faith, Schalkwyk’s ‘ambition to save her soul for Jesus Christ’¹⁷ grows. Later, when Ama meets Philip Quake, the black Englishman, he, brainwashed by the ideology of the white colonizers, sees ‘no purpose in delving into other books, except of course, the Book of Common Prayer.’¹⁸ He advises Ama to confine her reading to the Holy Bible.

The Bible, the holy book of the Christians, as Williams himself, during his conversation with De Bruyn, says, provides one ‘with justification for almost any course of action, perhaps even murder.’¹⁹ The Bible, no doubt, provides justification for slavery. When Ama reaches the plantation in the New World, she, like the other slaves, has to be baptized, since a slave was

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considered a savage, little better than wild forest animals until the slave was baptized. The religious lessons indoctrinated the slaves with the ideology of the colonizers and in this way helped to create docile and obedient subjects. When Ama attends the Sunday school run by the old catechist Benedito after Mass, Benedito makes the pagan slaves to utter: ‘Serve our Senhor well. Bear the hardships of slavery with patience. God has sent these things to test us.’ It is the Holy Book that says, ‘blessed are the meek.’²⁰

Intelligent Ama, unlike the multitude of black slaves arriving from Africa, can easily see through the designs of the white men. Instead of accepting each and every word of the Bible with blind faith, she starts analyzing the Holy Book critically. When the white priest constantly harps on sin, Ama finds it a sheer hypocrisy. How ironical it is that the whites, who are themselves the ‘greatest sinners,’ accuse the blacks of committing sins. She even starts questioning the strange Christian ritual of eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus. When the Yoruba Olukoya, the slave driver of Joseph, discovers Ama with a Portuguese Bible, a paper and a pencil, and the words of a portion of the Genesis written on the paper, he asks her, ‘Are you a Christian?’ and Ama’s reply surprisingly is ‘No, I have been baptized but I am not a Christian.’ She would not accept ‘the religion of the white man’ and ‘the religion of slavery’²¹ and thus acquiesces in her own enslavement. She even finds it hypocritical that what the Christians find oppressive in case of the Israelites, they themselves do with the blacks.

Most of the planters and slave owners viewed this form of literacy or ‘Bible literacy’ to be safer than “‘liberating literacy” which facilitates diversity and mobility.’²² De Bruyn or Ama’s Mijn Heer, who, in spite of being a slave trader and slave owner, however, in case of Ama, does this dangerous job of introducing Ama to the world of English literature which is not just a collection of religious texts, parables and sermons. She would, in the course of time, use this very language of the white man to talk back, to argue and to curse her oppressors. Her reading of the secular texts would also lead to her nonconformity and rebellious spirit. Her reading, however, begins with simpler texts like *The History of Goody Two Shoes; otherwise called Mrs. Margery Two-Shoes with the Means by which she Acquired her Learning and Wisdom, and in consequence thereof, her Estate*. Though De Bruyn initially fears that the idea of acquiring an estate ‘might be a somewhat premature ambition to plant in the breast of an illiterate slave

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girl,’²³ Ama ultimately reads it. In this story, the orphaned Margery is given a pair of shoes by the good Rev. Smith. When Margery realizes that Mr. Smith’s goodness and wisdom arises from his vast learning, Margery decides to learn and read. Known now as Goody Two-Shoes, she starts teaching other children. This, though a children’s chapbook, no doubt is a story of girls’/women’s education and learning and how this would ultimately lead to her acquiring an estate of her own. Ama also learns from De Bruyn ‘how to use her knowledge of the order of the alphabet to find a difficult word’²⁴ in Dr. Johnson’s *Dictionary*. Apart from Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and other novels, De Bruyn, during her argument with Williams mentions *Moll Flanders*. Moll Flanders, ‘a shameless harlot’²⁵ in Williams’ words, no doubt, is not a typical docile and servile woman. There is indication that Ama reads these books in Pieter De Bruyn’s collection. She is even taught the basics of arithmetic and the basic science by De Bruyn. Later in Brazil, Ama would learn from her friend and the Senhor’s daughter, Miranda, about Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* where he criticizes slavery as being stupid and wicked.

David Williams, the Captain of the *The Love of Liberty*, on the other hand is, from the very beginning, critical of De Bruyn and Schalkwyk’s endeavour of teaching a black female slave. Williams’ argument is in tune with most of the European slave owners of that time:

I must tell you that I disapprove in principle of teaching slaves and others of the laboring classes more than the bare minimum they need to perform their duties. It is in general prejudicial to their morals and happiness. It persuades them to despise their lot in life, rather than making good servants of them. Instead of wearing their yoke with patience, they become ill-mannered and intractable.²⁶

As Regan Garey observes in his post “Literacy among Slaves”, these slave owners ‘feared the freedom literacy would bestow on their slaves.’²⁷ Williams even disapproves of any kind of inquisitiveness in a black female slave. If De Bruyn enjoys the curiosity and innocent questions of Ama, Williams is overtly critical of such inquisitiveness which he considers a result of Ama’s education: ‘Curiosity is unbecoming in the female sex. This girl’s curiosity surely comes from your teaching her to read. An ability

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to read is prejudicial in any woman, in a slave doubly and triply so. It opens them to ideas unsuited to their station in life.’²⁸ What patriarchy and colonialism want is complete subservience and service without any complaint. Subordinate groups like women and blacks are supposed to be docile and obedient. People like Williams would not allow even the white women of his own family to learn to read and write. And for a black female slave like Ama, this is something unthinkable.

De Bruyn, however, would not restrict the learning of every slave to ‘rudimentary literary skills’ that would guarantee social order remained intact and caste would not move.²⁹ That is why he does not agree with what he considers the old-fashioned ideas of Williams on the issue of educating the slaves. In his opinion, teaching Pamela has not only changed her, but ‘it has also been a rewarding experience’ for him. Pamela, in fact, becomes ‘a better companion,’ ‘a better intellectual company’ to him than any “man” in the Elmina castle.³⁰ Ama, the quick and intelligent learner and avid reader that she is, indeed becomes more intellectually competent and can speak better and more refined English than most of the less educated Europeans involved in the transatlantic slave trade.

If the only profit of Caliban, who is taught his master’s language in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, is to ‘know how to curse,’³¹ Ama, a black female slave can use the colonizer’s language to curse her oppressors and tormentors. After De Bruyn dies of Yellow Jack disease, the much-abhorred and tyrannous Sven Jensen, the Danish Chief Merchant at Elmina and second in command and successor to De Bruyn, orders that Ama should again be taken to the female dungeon. Ama bursts in anger: ‘You shit. You shit-arse. You rapist. You bastard. You pig. You filthy pig.’³² Later, on *The Love of Liberty*, when Ama is to be forcefully fed the internal organs of the two murdered white men as a punishment for her rebellion, she screams at the Captain addressing him as ‘barbarian’ and ‘cannibal.’³³ Not only can she curse picking up just a few English abuses from her masters like a parrot, but she can also argue logically using the language of the white oppressors. After the death of De Bruyn, Ama’s Mijn Heer, by the virtue of the Company’s rules, Jensen is automatically invested with all the powers of the Director-General in an establishment where the Director-General is second only to God. As soon as De Bruyn’s will is shown to him, Jensen summarily dismisses it as a forgery and burns it to destroy the

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evidence. It is because of her mastery over the language that Ama, unlike most of the black slaves, can understand the contents of the will which was dictated by the dying De Bruyn to Schalkyk in her presence. In this will De Bruyn has granted Ama the much prized freedom. Though Ama would ultimately have to surrender at the hands of the guards, she can at least argue in her defence: ‘He ordered the Minister to write it in his will. I heard the minister read it to him and saw Mijn Heer sign it, weak as he was.’

³⁴Again, on the English ship, *The Love of Liberty*, Ama scolds the villainous Fred Knaggs when he attempts to rape a young slave girl: ‘Unhand that girl at once, you villain. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. She is young enough to be your daughter.’³⁵

Ama, however, does not disclose the fact that she knows English until this moment. When the Captain asks whether any of the slaves know English, she remains silent. Through this act, Ama acquires a special kind of power. Pretending that she does not know the white men’s language, she can get access to whatever they are conversing in English among themselves. When Williams employs Pamela (Ama) as the interpreter or linguist of the ship’s surgeon, Butcher, intelligent Pamela turns this assignment to the advantage of herself and of her fellow slaves. Butcher would tell her what to say to the slaves and her job is to translate his words to them. Similarly she would translate the slaves’ words to the doctor. Since both parties do not understand each other’s language, the role of the interpreter is of paramount importance in such a situation. Ama is in an advantageous position as she can speak six African languages thanks to her captivity in Africa and her interactions with various people. The Englishmen like the Captain of *The Love of Liberty*, Williams, the chief mate, Arbuthnot and Butcher know from their experience in slave trading how difficult it is ‘to manage without the help of honest and competent interpreters.’³⁶ Ama, however, uses her knowledge of the English language on the one hand and the African languages on the other to instigate a rebellion on the ship. The surgeon Butcher and other Englishmen believe that she accurately conveys their messages to the slaves. She, in reality, does exactly the opposite. She addresses her fellow slaves as brothers, sisters and fathers, inspires them to rise up against the oppressors and

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instructs them what their course of action would be.

It is the language of the white men that becomes a boon for Ama and her fellow African slaves in Bahia. The African tribes did not have scripts of their own. They could neither read, nor write. Language for them was oral and limited mainly to their tribes. Though many of them knew more than one language, it was no way possible for one to know all the African languages. This led to communication gap between the slaves. Since most of them were not familiar with reading or writing, it would appear to them as witchcraft or magic. But it is precisely this magic that would help the enslaved Africans to talk back, to write back and to fight back. As Olukoya, the Yoruba slave at the *Eugenho de Cima*, says, ‘That is the greatest gift that their God gave to the whites, greater than their ships, greater than their guns. Until we learn to read and write, we will never be able to defeat them and regain our freedom.’³⁷ It is Portuguese, the language of the oppressors and an instrument of oppression that helps the rebels and revolutionaries to communicate by sending and receiving written messages.

The language of the white colonizers not only helps the Africans to organize a rebellion, but it also helps in a unique way to preserve their own cultures, customs, religions and folklores which the Africans have brought with them. Intriguing it may sound, but a few examples would make it clear. When in the forest adjacent to the plantation, Africans from different nations, speaking different tongues and having different gods invokes their spirits and give their offerings to the gods, Olukoya invokes the spirit of Eshu, speaking not in any African language but in Portuguese. It is their oppressors who give the slaves a common language and Ama is thankful to them for this. The ruthless colonizers of course did so not for the benefit of the African slaves. Their purpose was to run the entire process of plantation works smoothly and to convert those slaves to Christianity. During a conversation with Domba when the two are reunited, Ama says: ‘They are the masters; we are their slaves; it follows that we have to learn their language. But we arrived here speaking many different tongues. We did not know one another. Had you ever heard of a place called Angola? Now we know that we are all Africans.’³⁸ This leads to a kind of solidarity among the diverse ethnic groups of the Africans.

Unlike some of the black Europeans, who would look down upon their

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own culture, religion and language as inferior to what they consider the divine and graceful European languages, Ama does never want to forget her own mother tongue for the European languages like English, Dutch or Portuguese. Reverend Quake, the Cape Coast Chaplain who has ‘mastered the white man’s language (English) and become ruler of the white man’s church in his own home town,’ insists that Ama should speak to him only in English and not in Fanti since he ‘neither speak(s) nor understand(s) that heathenish tongue.’ ‘To have an English name is an honour and to have acquired a command of the language is a blessing, especially for a pagan’³⁹ Quake tells Pamela, when he comes to know about her English education and her mastery of the foreign language in a very short time. Ama, much oppressed, humiliated and dehumanized by the white slave traders, on the other hand, is proud of being a pagan. Having acquired a command of the foreign tongue is not something she considers a blessing.

Manu Herbstein’s fiction *Ama*, a story of the transatlantic slave trade, which is based to a certain extent on the slave uprising in 1826 in Salvador under the leadership of a woman, Zeferina and in 1835 under the leadership of another woman called Luiza Mahin, shows the indomitable spirit of an African slave girl, who, uses her knowledge of the white men’s language to talk back to her oppressors. It shows the debate among the Europeans regarding the literacy and education of the slaves. If the ‘Bible education’ was meant for creating docile and servile subjects, it is the secular education and the scientific knowledge that would lead to inquisitiveness and argumentative attitude. Ama uses her mastery of the English, Dutch and Portuguese languages to organize slave revolts by using her power as an interpreter. It is her ability to read and write that leads to the revolution in Bahia. Herbstein’s *Ama* shows how the educated African slaves used their knowledge of the European languages and literature and science to talk back, to curse, to argue logically, to build solidarity among themselves, to preserve their own cultural identities and languages and religions in a unique way, to know each other belonging to different African nations and finally, to fight back. Failed, though their rebellions may be, it was the rebellions that would ultimately lead to the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1850.

TRIVIUM

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