

Agony at Leaving Homeland Behind in Hannah More's 'Slavery: A Poem'

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Abstract

Romantic women writers have a considerable share in voicing against social issues. Although their works have gone into oblivion, they have no less contribution than that of the canonical male authors of the period. Hannah More (1745-1833) was one of such conspicuous poetic voices of the Romantic Revival. Her delineation of the unspeakable suffering of African slaves served a great deal to point out the injustices society inflicted upon those unfortunate souls. In this paper, I will try to analyse her 1788 poem, 'Slavery: A Poem', from an abolitionist stance. I intend to read the poem in terms of its portrayal of the deplorable condition of the African slaves, the pain associated with the separation of family, and More's ways to sympathise with them and instil the same feeling in her readers as well. As revealed in various documents, an umpteen number of Africans were trafficked and chained on ships mercilessly. Thus, shortage of space to sleep and insufficient water to quench thirst, let alone having food, led them to anguish. Most of the time, such an excruciating journey was completed with the end of innocent lives. Sometimes, in the course of the transportation of human commodities, the dingy and unhealthy conditions of ships produced transmissible diseases that required the removal of the deceased bodies daily. Focusing on this barbaric practice, British women anti-slavery poets composed sentimental verses to impel the government by diverting public opinion against slavery. This paper will critically discuss how More vehemently argues that having access to liberty is a natural right which cannot be constrained to a group of people. In the poem, she details the series of wrongdoings exercised by slave traders while berating them for their evil deeds. Reading the poem closely, I will endeavour to present how the liberty of the underprivileged souls is overtaken by the so-called 'polished' race generation after generation by exercising sheer political power and making their lives miserable by alienating them from their dear native land.

Keywords: *Slavery, trafficking, agony, family, Hannah More.*

The period from the 1780s to 1830s was a seminal time in the history of not just the English world but across the globe. The French Revolution had generally been regarded as the significant event of this age that gave

attention to the ideas of freedom, equality and human rights that each one naturally inherits. Apart from that, the era observed another important subject having equally profound influence and intellectual repercussions – the slave trade. Although, there are very few accounts in mainstream English Romanticism about the slave trade, yet, it may be said that it became the most burning social issue of the epoch. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Bristol became Britain's second-largest city by participating in the lucrative business of slaves and sugar. Indeed, it was this heinous trade that drew thousands of Africans for over two centuries, muffling the voices of those who had been carried across the horrid middle passage into the very domain of slavery. From the historical perspective, it was the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) after the War of the Spanish Succession which allowed Britain to provide slaves to the Spanish colonies. This contract provided the country with a commercial opportunity to traffic human beings rampantly. Thus, by the 1780s, Britain was involved in the profitable business of trading humans. Many companies, captains, and sailors journeyed across Africa to plunder its people. Checking into the Dark Continent, British captains and sailors with the help of some deceitful Africans schemed to deracinate large numbers of natives from their homeland to the West Indies and forced them to accept servility. Umpteen numbers of Africans were forcefully stuffed on ships and chained hand and foot to each other. They got barely anything to quench their thirst or take a rest.¹ Many official documents and accounts from slavers reveal that Africans were simply packed into any vacant space like articles of trade. Sometimes, the unfettered female slaves spooned the males, who were tightly tied, to free space. In such a claustrophobic ambiance, slaves were compelled to fight for breathing in the fresh air. The lack of air sometimes resulted in suffocation. Thus, scarcity of space, air, and water increased the death toll.² It was reported that often 'the deck was covered with blood and mucus, and resembled a slaughterhouse,' and 'on more than one occasion, sailors grew angry with them and beat them.'³ The inhumanity with which the slavers behaved with them is inconceivable whereas the monetary profit acquired by them seems limitless. However, such an unwholesome atmosphere produced contagious, lethal diseases and demanded the disposal of corpses daily. Thus, on the one hand, it was only corporal death that finished the agonising journey as it was a place beyond the reach of slavers. As mentioned by James Arnold, on a ship called the Ruby, some

TRIVIUM

enthralled Africans ventured to escape, with one of the men being punished and sent to ‘the hold’ for ‘about eight hours’ where he was:

severely scalded with a mixture of water and fat, which was repeatedly thrown down upon him. When this same man at last relented, through the influence of a black trader, he was further wounded in a scuffle with his captors, then chained to the foremast for three days, after which he was declared dead and thrown overboard.⁴

Thus, it was only death that settled a captive’s affliction and misery. On the other hand, incorporation into servitude meant a kind of public death as their very identity was negated. This deprivation of liberty correlated with losing one’s claims, relationships, and even, forsaking procreative freedom. Moreover, it abrogated their democratic rights and thereby, in a way, dehumanized them.

However, if a shackled African were to remain alive in the Middle Passage, he would find himself a thrall in the New World. It is a fact that they were indispensable elements for the continuation of the trade, but substitutable at any time. Voicing in support of Africans, when Clarkson started gathering evidence for the Abolition Movement in the 1780s, the brutalities of the Middle Passage had become widespread. In 1787, the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade raised unrest through a massive movement with the evidentiary propositions of William Wilberforce and William Pitt’s resolution on the slave trade. Feeling empathy with the appeals of the Society and having his conscience at work, Sir William Dolben addressed the detestable nature of the slave trade in the House of Commons. On May 9, 1788, Dolben contended against slavery as ‘a most crying evil.’⁵ His outright focus was on the wretched condition of the Middle Passage in which thousands of Africans were shipped from the coast of Africa to various West Indian ports through this transatlantic slave ship system. This became a grave issue that needed to be fixed in due time. Resistance came from various spheres. After much discussion and obstruction, the Dolben Bill was passed in the House of Lords on July 10, 1788, and got royal approbation very soon. Some remarkable British women addressed this issue by ushering in the abolition of the obnoxious trade and commodification of human beings. Their glorification of freedom and vilification of slavery resonated across the Atlantic, initiating an anti-slavery community of women. As talks and views regarding ways and means of liberation from the inhumane practice roved around the

Agony at Leaving Homeland Behind in Hannah More's 'Slavery: A Poem'

Atlantic world, many writers were enthused to create works protesting slavery. Women poets like Hannah More, Helen Maria Williams, and Ann Yearsley responded to the hearings in the British parliament on abolition and incorporated this issue of slavery into emotional verse to convince the readers of the immorality of slavery through a particular set of themes. The best-known name of popular counter-revolutionary propaganda, however, was Hannah More (1745-1833). More's invocation of 'Liberty' in her poem 'Slavery: A Poem' (1788) has the aspect to present a critique of slavery in terms of human rights. My paper intends to analyse More's poem on the abolitionist stance. I aim to read the poem in terms of its portrayal of the deplorable condition of African slaves after being forcefully alienated from their native place and More's ways to extend sympathy to them and to inspire the same response in her readers.

In canonical British Romanticism, writers are usually mentioned as the Big Six including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and later William Blake; not taking into account the name of a single female poet until recently. It is in the past thirty years or so that women writers, so far disregarded by the canon, have come to be a force to be considered in Romanticism. It is, indeed, true that the importance of women poets of the Romantic period has been one of 'a voice not loud, but deep.'⁶ Talking over slavery, both men and women writers have substantial roles. The canonical male Romantics acknowledged that it (slavery) 'was not only morally wrong and politically despotic [...] but psychologically destructive to the enslaver as well as the enslaved.'⁷ Indeed they were kind-hearted towards African slaves whose social rights were crushed in English society. The physical suffering and mental affliction experienced by the black slaves found expression through their writings. Through their anti-slavery campaign, they denigrated how the English government and the religious institutions were ravaging human liberty. In fact, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey had intimate connections with the esteemed abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. They were very much aware of how the slave trade was affecting the lives of the poor black souls. Among male Romantics, Blake was the first who focused on the issue of slavery in his poems such as 'The Little Black Boy' (1789) and 'Visions of Daughters of Albion' (1793). Yet, if carefully observed, it will be discerned that the issue of slavery was worked on much more in the poetry of women than in men. Thus, some

TRIVIUM

postulate that women poets ‘were quick to make connections between injustices’ to them and the enthralled.⁸ Kerri Andrews, an eminent scholar on More, illuminates that it is the finer feeling of the female self that made them supporters of social issues like abolitionism and ‘guardians of morality.’⁹

The year 1788 is significant for abolitionists because, anyhow, Britain got a moral sense in the matter of the slave trade. For the first time, a policy that had so far been supported for its monetary profit was refuted. Among others, in the course of the dissension over the Middle Passage Bill, Edmund Burke decried that dealing with the flesh was against human nature. Individuals such as Scottish thinker Adam Ferguson, in *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1769), declared that ‘[n]o one is born a slave; because everyone is born with all his original rights. No one can become a slave, because no one, from being a person, can, in the language of the Roman law, become a thing or subject of property.’¹⁰ This human trafficking was also condemned by abolitionists such as James Ramsay who remarked that it debased the hearts and polluted the minds of traders and merchants.¹¹ In 1807, the British Parliament passed the act to abolish the slave trade. The passing of this act took substantial toil by both men and women. A larger number of historians emphasize the role of the powerful men that fought against Parliament such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce. Hardly do they assess the contribution of women in the abolition campaign. Women are eclipsed by active male abolitionists, and their struggle is not taken into consideration to this day. However, what abolitionists aimed was to reveal the inherent moral wrong of slavery through literature, legislation efforts, and freedom suits. The approaches taken by white women to end the slave trade were through approbating abolition campaigns, bolstering the ban on slave-grown sugar, and composing anti-slavery writings.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth-century, discussions regarding women and their proper place in society were argued by many eminent personages like Locke and Rousseau, Astell and Aphra Behn, and, of course, Mary Wollstonecraft, who in her *Vindication* famously compared an eighteenth-century English woman’s societal position with that of a slave.¹² A woman of the eighteenth century found herself defenceless in changing social scenarios. According to the notion of separate spheres, men should manage the public sphere, administering matters of economics and state, whereas women were convinced to

Agony at Leaving Homeland Behind in Hannah More's 'Slavery: A Poem'

wholeheartedly indulge themselves with domesticity, showing the qualities of fidelity, decency, and docility. Reading women were not much appreciated and their presence created uneasiness in the cultural sphere. However, women from middle-class backgrounds had the liberty to be loud on moral issues as members of the 'provincial middle-classes' who 'rushed forward to sign petitions, organize committees, subscribe funds, and distribute books and pamphlets'¹³ and thus engineered to achieve the cherished abolition. Yet, Midgley refers that sometimes their signatures were considered to be aberrations to a few as to abate the effect of the paper.¹⁴ However, the reinstatement of the texts of eighteenth-century women writers into the canon in a way re-examines the historical realities in respect to the lives of not just women authors, but women in general at diverse class levels. In late eighteenth-century Britain, women gradually began to search and reflect on their very identities in the fast-changing society. With a new zeal, they were all set to emancipate themselves and to think the same for others as well.

By the late eighteenth century, a coterie of learned women emerged with a holistic motive to educate and uplift distressed women. They played a significant role to free women from their gender stereotyped roles. They were known as the bluestockings. They met at informal gatherings and discussed the fashion of the day, significant literary subjects, social issues, and even debated moral questions, which seemed to be preposterous until then. The circle gave emotional and academic support to the rising women poets and sometimes, a financial one as well. The group was introduced by Elizabeth Montagu, a British literary critic, and writer, in the early 1750s. Hannah More belonged to this group. As a strong defender of the abolitionist movement, More paved the way for some of her coevals and succeeding generations of women to express their dissents against human trafficking and trade in all respects.

Hannah More made acquaintance with William Wilberforce in 1776 and became an earnest advocate of abolition. She began writing 'Slavery: A Poem' in late December 1787 at the request of Wilberforce and the Abolition Committee. It was Hannah More's academic dignity that made the committee decide to use her as the spokesperson of the campaign. Another important reason behind the committee's choice of More was her evangelical background. However, she had in her mind the recent parliamentary debate on the anti-slavery movement.¹⁵ She began writing

TRIVIUM

‘Slavery: A Poem’ in late December 1787 hastily saying, ‘If it does not come out at the particular moment when the discussion comes on in parliament, it will not be worth a straw.’¹⁶ As an author, her role in the abolitionist movement comes up as a nation-building text. Through the standpoint from which ‘Slavery: A Poem’ is conceived, More asserts that she has full authority to speak. Despite being anxious about the publication of her verse in the context of political activism, she manages to render a very apt and insightful poem. The separation of the family through the slave trade and enslavement process features prominently in her poem and connects to the understanding of the importance of family within natural law. In the poem, she protests against the perpetuity of the slave trade by presenting its adverse effects upon traders and of course, on Africans while depicting the religious and emotional toll of the tragic bartering of humans.

Now, let us carry out a close examination of the poem concerning More’s idea of liberty and how it is overtaken by the so-called ‘polished’ race by exercising sheer force while ‘basking in Freedom’s beams.’¹⁷ Right from the beginning of the poem ‘Slavery’ More develops her plausibility with pathos. Though both her gender and occupation were conventionally linked with sensitivity, More is daring enough in stating emphatically the motives of her poetic dissent. Invoking the Goddess of Liberty, the poet inveighs against the erroneous and unrestrained rage of the plebeians. The feminized wrath renders passion with its entire being. She is ready to quash the republic to bring in social change and restore equality for all. Thus, with aggression in her words, More recounts a series of wrongdoings administered by slave traders upon the helpless Africans. She reproves them for their rapacity which leads them to engage in misdeeds. To promote her approbation for Africans, she, again and again, impeaches the slavers calling them ‘white savages.’¹⁸ Her intention behind this affront may be interpreted variedly. Firstly, she negates the entitlement they enjoy due to their position at the apex of the global hierarchy. These ruthless men only crave material gain. They have no finer feeling for the captives. Secondly, the very term ‘white savages’ corresponds to More’s spiritual advisor, John Newton’s account of sailors abusing African women aboard ships in *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* (1788). Deep down in history, it was the initiation of the plantation system in the West Indies that wholly altered everything, for ‘demand for African slaves sprang most of all from the development of a system of plantation agriculture.’¹⁹ The urge

Agony at Leaving Homeland Behind in Hannah More's 'Slavery: A Poem'

to go for a plantation system in the colonies began extensively when British capitalists felt the financial gain that plantations could bring. The most essential part of this system was total control over slaves. To flourish in no time, the system

required exacting standards of security [...] the whips and stocks were ever-present reminders of the punishment that would befall the slave who failed to work hard or show respect.²⁰

Thus, this inhumane trade made the lives of slaves deplorable and snatched away any mode of defiance against their white owners or even workers. More reproaches these vile men for plundering foreign lands and making a profit on human flesh. She points out the barbarity in seemingly cultured countrymen. Their very act ruins the ethical backbone of the nation. The sacrilegious trade enables them to thrive economically but precipitates their spiritual downfall. African life becomes the forfeiture for British opulence. It was the middle-class women who, indeed, strove to end the slave trade, whereas the upper-class was the most benefitted by the slave as observed by Midgley: 'by the eighteenth-century [...] black girls and boys had become fashionable as unwaged household servants among the aristocracy [...].'²¹ Sometimes, they became marks of social standing for their masters. They were shown as degraded exotics in customary pictures. Aristocrats never thought to have such a lavish life without relying upon the suffering of the slaves.

As a believer in liberty, More expresses her disgust over the involvement of Britons in the slave trade. She addresses the abstract liberty and charges her for flouting the destiny which heaven decreed:

If heaven has into being deigned to call
Thy light, O LIBERTY! To shine in all;
Bright intellectual Sun! Why does thy ray
To earth distribute only partial day?²²

More is loud enough to contend that it is insensitive humans who distort and fetter liberty. She unflinchingly alerts all Britons associated with the slave trade about the damage they are causing. Pointing out the link between avarice and the distress of the slaves, More remarks, 'O'er plundered realms to reign, detested lord, / Make millions wretched, and thyself abhorred.'²³ In the course of the Dolben debates, merchants tried out to divert public support for Africans and shift their concern to the shaky

TRIVIUM

economic condition under the abolition. More, rather than raising sympathy for the commercial threat, argues that their very deeds taint the reputation of their nation across the globe and generate ill feelings among neighbouring countrymen. The cruel trade not only breaches human rights but engenders the death of innumerable Africans and subjects women to sexual predation.

While lashing out at the slavers, More explicitly attests to the emotional equality of Africans to their white counterparts. Imploring the slave traders to bring an end to their violence, she lambasts them:

Hold murderers, hold! not aggravate distress;
Respect the passions you yourselves possess!
Ev'n you, of ruffian heart and ruthless hand
Love your own offspring, love your native land.²⁴

Using her profession as a means, she urges slaveholders to transmit their zeal for the betterment and identify with the feelings of helpless Africans. The 'love' Britons cherish for their children and native land indicate that they are capable of softer feelings. She argues for emotional equality and suggests that whites should use love as a palliative to free the Africans. In her poetic diatribe, she cautions them to terminate this trade considering their religion and ethics. Quite the contrary, she remarks that it is the absence of religious reverence for Christianity and formal education that make Africans 'dark and savage' and 'ignorant and blind.'²⁵ This viewpoint in a way subtly attests to the conviction of the traders and merchants who assumed that Africans were untroubled by torments. According to the so-called nerve theory, the natives of Africa were seemingly at the base of the hierarchy of feeling. However, affirming 'men should still be free,'²⁶ More boosts her poetic argument beyond the objectives of the Dolben Bill to urge the liberty of Africans. At the heart of More's ardent imploration is African suffering. She skilfully portrays their predicament in a scene of family separation and the dreadful journey on the Middle Passage. The poet envisions a homely space forcibly disassembled by the deceitful slave traders:

See the dire victim torn from social life,
The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife!
She, wretch forlorn! Is dragg'd by hostile hands,
To distant tyrants sold, in distant lands!

Agony at Leaving Homeland Behind in Hannah More's 'Slavery: A Poem'

Transmitted miseries, and successive chains,
The sole sad heritage her child obtains!²⁷

In this poetic space, More exerts her absolute authority. She, again and again, implores traders to reflect on 'holy Freedom'²⁸ that they assert to be their exclusive right and let it expand without being impeded by shams. Owners who subject the Africans to forced labour and sever them from their dear native land are doubly cursed, for they not only gain wealth but 'specious crimes'.²⁹ More's account of 'agonizing wife' and 'shrieking babe' gives credence to the distressing experience. Readers would surely sympathize with the narrative of family agony. The child and the woman are endangered against the domination of capitalism. More's image of an aggrieved mother emphasises the trauma of the slave trade. Suicide was often chosen as a way of respite by those suffering in the slave trade, whether at capture, in the Middle Passage, or during enslavement. More sympathetically presents the case of Quashi. Though Quashi is maltreated and tortured by his master, Quashi responds with gentle protestations and self-destruction. As outlined in a footnote written by More:

"Master, I have been bred up with you from a child; I have loved you as myself: in return, you have condemned me to a punishment of which I must ever have borne the marks; thus only can I avoid them." And so saying, he drew the knife with all his strength across his own throat, and fell down dead, without a groan, on his master's body.³⁰

Thus, Quashi is depicted as almost Christ-like in taking his own life rather than that of his imprudent master, but more than that he is like a subdued woman in accepting without protestation that his lord has the right to dominate him. Many women in the eighteenth century did so because, despite their frustration and heartbreak, they could not imagine a world in which they could possess any status. More is optimistic enough to think that the utter pain of the natives of Africa will motivate her readers to take collective action. Grieving over the miserable situation of the enslaved people, she becomes the epitome of the woman of feeling. Thus, 'Slavery' propounds More like a woman of great sensibility. Although More does not wholeheartedly receive a doctrine of class equality, she does consider that it is an obligation for the maintenance of British character that liberty, security, and regard be bestowed to all humans, while adhering to the status quo accordingly.

In 'Slavery', More directly faces the new advocacy for slavery and

TRIVIUM

colour. She audaciously questions, ‘What strange offence, what aggravated sin? /They stand convicted of—a darker skin.’³¹ All men, according to More, should be free. No one can own a man, but society may direct his place and impose it with powers beyond his emendation. More substantiates her viewpoint not with the new notions of Romanticism, but rather the enlightenment ideal of reason. But then, she frets over reason and appeals not only to the philosophy of Natural Rights but to the core of human emotions. She emphasises that the crime associated with the trade does hurt them not only physically but also spiritually. Here, the reference to Yellow Fever can be made that attacked the British during the height of British slave trading. The fever would take the patient unawares, with fits of hot and cold, and severe pain in the body. The patient’s eyes would turn soggy and yellow, making them look unusual that, finally would lead to insanity. However, while continuing to cherish her fondness for the British status quo, she admits that the African does not have enough reason for the British male. She says that their senses, though not reason, are as profound as those of their subjugator. She indicts those men who wrong the Africans as they are indeed tainting the title of Christianity itself.

More concludes with the noble salvation of the British people that will be complete with the abolition of the slave trade. More paints her foresighted vision of the end of slavery wherein, ‘And FAITH and FREEDOM spring from Mercy’s hands.’³² Sadly, in reality, faith and freedom did not prevail in Africa and they continued to toil in the field and be separated from their wives and children. The condition of African women was more wretched than that of men. They were physically assaulted and consequently would bear children that would be taken away from them and sold off and when politics would become unnecessary, the entire concept of abolition would be left behind. More establishes that the benevolent God is not divided by any geographical boundary and His bounty is showered on all. More shatters the idea of the powerful who profess God as theirs. Rather, she says that God is the protector of the powerless. Thus, she at length proclaims what is right and wrong and justifies it by saying it is the literal truth of scripture. As a woman, this is a daring and influential move. However, the fact that More was a woman and that she unbrokenly developed a space for her that may be deemed as her distinctive feminist act.

Endnotes :

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TRIVIUM

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¹⁷ Hannah More, *Slavery: A Poem* (London: T.Cadell, 1788), p. 9.

¹⁸ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.15.

¹⁹ James A Rawley, and Stephen D Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (Lincoln: University Of Nebraska Press, 2005), p. 13.

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²¹ Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, pp. 9-10.

²² More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.1.

²³ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.16.

²⁴ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, pp.8-9.

²⁵ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.10.

²⁶ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.10.

²⁷ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.8.

²⁸ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.9.

²⁹ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.9.

³⁰ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.8.

³¹ More, *Slavery: A Poem*, pp.6-7.

³² More, *Slavery: A Poem*, p.10.