www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 6.292 (SJIF)

Musical Narratives of Freedom: Afro-American Spirituals as Agents of Empowerment and Identity

Dr Kavya Rajeev
Asst. Professor of English
NDA, Pune

Abstract:
The paper delves into the evolution of Afro-American spiritual music, examining its emergence as a vital form of expression within the African-American community. Stemming from the forced singing and dancing aboard slave ships, the musicality of the enslaved population transformed upon arrival in America, assimilating elements from white culture. The study explores spirituals, often termed "sorrow songs," as a means of articulating deep suffering, endurance, and a yearning for freedom. The characteristics of Afro-American spirituals are analyzed, emphasizing their simplicity, immediacy, criticism of present conditions, inter-community communication, and reflection of hopes and desires. In essence, spirituals conveyed the lived reality of slaves and played a crucial role in their struggle to maintain identity and humanity in a world that sought to deny them both.

Keywords: Spirituals, music, Afro-american, slave, songs.

Introduction

Aboard the ships carrying the slaves to America, some captains would either allow or force the enslaved Africans to sing and dance to keep them fit and strong. But even as they sang and danced in their own languages, the slaves were united by sorrow and fear. Upon arrival in a new locale, the intrinsic musicality within the enslaved population underwent a transformative evolution, incorporating elements derived from their assimilation into the prevailing white culture. This study endeavours to comprehensively examine the multifaceted dimensions of Afro-American spiritual music, particularly exploring its emergence as one of the earliest conduits for expressive articulation within the African-American community. Moreover, this paper seeks to unravel the process through which this form of auditory "speech" evolved into an instrument of defiance and a wellspring of hope for a community systematically deprived of a literal and metaphorical "voice."

The spirituals are sometimes called “sorrow songs”, sang to express deep suffering, endurance and yearning for freedom in the peaceful kingdom of heaven. Spirituals offered emotional release, psychic relief and helped some slaves keep up their morale in a cruel new world. They sang to lighten their burden, remind each other of hope, restore their spirits, increase their courage and enjoy the little free time they had. The Afro-American spiritual is characterized by five major aspects: their simplicity which carries a core of subtlety; a sense of immediacy

often in which the historical past and the present collide; a criticism of their present day condition; usage of the only 'voice' available to them as a means of inter- community communication; and finally, a kind of summation of the community's hopes and desires (Pershey 64). The spirituals conveyed to the world the lived reality of the slave and it also assisted them in their desperate struggle to maintain their identity and humanity in a world which denied them both.

Discussion

The paper will take up a few spiritual songs to bring out the pervading themes that run through them. The song 'I got Shoes' expresses the intense desire for freedom which is one of the pervading themes in most of the spirituals:

I got shoes, you got shoes,
All God's children got shoes.
When I get to Heav'n gonna put on my shoes,
Gonna walk all over God's Heav'n, Heav'n, Heav'n,
Everybody talkin' 'bout Heav'n ain't goin' there,
Heav'n, Heav'n, Heav'n.
Gonna walk all over God's Heav'n. (Work 75)

In the song "When I get to Heaven" means when I get my freedom, the 'I' here is the universal 'I' of the community, and the 'I' again is not bound by the constraints of time. If freedom was a long way to go for the first person who sang this song, still they didn't despair because they knew freedom will inevitable come, if not for them at least for their children or grandchildren. Thus the 'I' comprises of the present and the future Afro-American self. And 'shoes' here refers to the talents and abilities, which the slaves were never able to express even though they possessed them. So it is mirroring of the intense desire felt by the Afro-American community to reach their fullest potential, if only they were released from the shackles of slavery. "Everybody talkin' 'bout Heav'n ain't goin' there" is a fine critique of the Christian masters who call themselves as Christians, yet practice slavery. Further down the song they sing that if they get a chance, they are going to "walk all over God's heav'n", intending that they are going to make every section of the community feel their power. They know that they can do it. What is represented here is the desires and hopes of the slave community when they are envisioning a future when they could tear down the wreck they are in and build a new, solid world. And it is ironic to note that, it is this strong voice of protest that many early racist critics interpreted as the acceptance of their condition by the Afro-American community. When the white masters thought the black slaves were singing dainty little fantasy pieces, the slaves were actually writing some of the strongest poetry ever created. And their genius lies in the fact that though veiled in the form of spirituals, and constrained by its scope it still contained their reflections about their social condition, their yearning for democracy, revolution, morals, nature, death, love, in fact all the great and universal subjects of poetry that have been dwelled on.

Another aspect that makes spirituals more than versified Bible lessons is the free-floating imagery that moves across time and space barriers at will, joining conceptual spaces that cannot

be joined in reality. Spirituals link together sacred and secular imagery with an ease that tells us how closely these two worlds—even if they were separate spheres—were connected for the Afro-American community. By means of biblical imagery, these poets were able to forge an intimate connection with other times, places, and characters through the sheer vitality of their belief in such a way, that all of time and space seems to be having the same limits and boundaries. The marvelously spirited song *Don't Yo' Hab Eberybody Fo' Yo' Fr'en* calls out the hypocrisy of the society the slaves were part of:

Don't yo' hab eberybody fo' yo' fr'en
Don't yo' hab eberybody fo' yo' fr'en.
I tell yo' what yo' fr'en will do
Dey will sit and eat and drink wid yo'
But when yo' trubble come
Yo' fr'en begin to run.
Don't yo' hab eberybody fo' yo' fr'en
Don't yo' hab eberybody fo' yo' fr'en.
Meet yo' bruddah in de mornin'
Ax him how he do
Yo' meet him again in de ebenin'
He done tell a lie on yo.'
Don't yo' hab eberybody fo' yo' fr'en
Don't yo' hab eberybody fo' yo' fr'en.
Don't yo' forsake yo' mother
I tell yo' what yo' mus' do
When yo' father forsake yo'
Yo' mother will stand by you.
Don't yo' hab eberybody fo' yo' fr'en
Don't yo' hab eberybody fo' yo' fr'en. (Work 89)

Once again, we have a song that demonstrates how much the slaves' lives—as shown in their art—were a composite of the "sacred" and "secular" with little distinction made between the holy and profane, or the religious and social. This intermingling reflects the values of African culture, which were then mapped over the slaves' understanding of a Christianity that was not restricted to church on Sunday. The song combines commentary on the nature of their view of true Christianity with a vivid sociological portrait of a dimension of the slave culture.

If we listen closely, we hear in the spirituals the determination of a people to be in a society that denied their existence; we hear an affirmation of dignity, the essential humanity of their spirits, in a society where slave-masters relegated Black life to nothing more than a property to be owned. Slave music represented the ultimate distillation of all slave experiences. Some were protest songs, others were songs of adaptation. But all of them sought to help the slave transcend the inhuman condition of slavery. The most important thing, however was that the slaves used their music as a medium for communication. They looked at this world clearly and left us documentation, through their songs, as to how they viewed life. The slaves used

metonymic devices in their songs, choosing one specific event or aspect from the Bible or from their own lives. They also received release from feelings of frustration, degradation, and alienation through metaphorical references to the Israelites' experiences. Slaves created acceptable images for masters to interpret, since metonymic-metaphoric phrases of the Jews' trials allowed for inferences that the enslaved people had become devoutly religious. (McIntyre 152)

'Steal away to Jesus' an old time favorite and still popular today, used the name of Jesus to mask an open and obvious invitation to the slaves to steal away to freedom:

Steal away, steal away to Jesus,
Steal away, steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here.
My lord calls me. He calls me by thunder.
The trumpet sounds within my soul.
I ain't got long to stay here. (Work 56)

The literal Christian reading that the slaves would have intended to be heard by their masters would have been meaningful to the slaves themselves—in other words, it was not wholly a mask or ruse. That message would have been that Jesus calls to Christians by natural signs, as the deity often communicates in slave songs through thunder, lightning, clouds, rainbows, and rain, as well as rocks, mountains, rivers, and the sky. In slave songs, "home" rarely has a single and determinate meaning. It is a concept characterized by multiplicity, with a range of meanings that can be literal, but is more often metaphorical, religious, historical, futuristic, and even hypothetical, existing largely in the realm of the imagination and most often expressed in poetry and music. Associations of home radiate backwards and forwards in time, to a past in Africa that such references aim to recapture. This act does not come from experience—that is, for most of the slaves, knowledge of Africa was not firsthand but was inherited or mythical and needed to be reconstructed. Drawing the analogy between the conditions of the Black American slaves and the Israelites in Egypt, is the song *Go Down Moses*:

When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go.
Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land.
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go (Work 126)

Slave songs express a view that is explicitly Christian in depicting heaven as the final home of the true believer and belief in Jesus as the means of arriving there. The freedom of the afterlife is consistently linked with imagery of release from bondage on earth. Slave songs also contain strong messages of political insurgency based on biblical principles of ethical conduct, including comments on the hypocrisy of Christian teachings and beliefs of slavery advocates. It seems

likely that the slaves adopted an ironic distance from what they perceived as the Christianity of the slave-holders.

In this next verse, *Deep River*, the references to home could be interpreted in different ways by the slaves and the masters:

Deep river, my home is over Jordan.
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.
O, chillun, O, don't you want to go to that gospel feast
That promised land, that land where all is peace.
Walk into heaven, take my seat, and cast my crown at Jesus' feet.
Lord, I want to cross over into campground. (Work 134)

Clearly this theme of longing for freedom and escape, be it going "in de wilderness," meaning nearby woods in which Blacks met secretly or "stealing away" to the northern states, Canada, or the motherland, Africa, recurred with great frequency throughout the spiritual.

The religious African heritage of the slaves included a custom of parable and prophecy that enhanced their abilities to incorporate much of the Bible stories into the spirituals. Constantly striving to give voice to their experiences, slaves found a ready-made text in the story of the children of Israel. They utilized these stories in songs, developing a communication network of double, triple, and more meanings. This deception was possible because of the white master's religious hypocrisy. This indirect mode of expression utilizes metonymic devices to create metaphors and ambiguities, and is well known as one of the characteristics that distinguishes the art of the East from that of the West. Multiple-meaning texts also characterize traditional traits in African and African American music. This ambiguous mode not only masks much of the meaning but also much of the fundamental mood. Thus masters would be led to believe, or could choose to make- believe, that slaves actually were happy in the face of such apparent misery. (McIntyre 53) ‘Steal away to Jesus’ and ‘Go down Moses’ can be seen as songs that are disguised to look like spirituals but are in fact actually disguised signs for the methods of escape. Every reference to crossing the Jordan means escape to the North; every Israelite battle signals the slaves' struggle for freedom; every reference to Elijah's chariot or the gospel train alludes to the Underground Railroad; and every trumpet blast for judgment day means emancipation. At the same time, we should not undermine the religious elements in the spirituals, they were indeed addresses to Lord the almighty as well. In addition, the body of spirituals must be seen as a communication system created and utilized by the slaves who used double meaning and allusions which hid a plethora of signs and messages underneath the surface.

Conclusion

The Afro-American spiritual serves as a dynamic repository of historical narratives, encapsulating stratagems for liberation, aspirations for migration to more favorable territories, petitions for justice from the Christian deity, and other profound themes. Imbued with clandestine messages and coded expressions, this musical genre functions as a conduit through

which the history of a people's endeavors for rebellion, adaptive methodologies, survival tactics, and both explicit and implicit pathways to freedom are conveyed. In his seminal work, "The Souls of Black Folk," W. E. B. Du Bois designated slave songs within the chapter " The Sorrow Songs" as emblematic of "the soul of the black slave" (168) and as "the voices of my brothers and sisters"(168). Within this context, Du Bois discerned a heroic communal sentiment across generations, characterizing it as his own and portraying it as "The articulate message of the slave to the world"(172). Furthermore, the Reverend Marshall W. Taylor, in the Preface to his publication "A Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies," similarly reframed slave songs as collective achievements rather than individual creations. In advocating for a deeper understanding of the African-American experience, Taylor declared, "If you would know the colored people, learn their songs"(07). These sentiments underscore the profound societal and cultural significance ascribed to Afro-American spirituals, portraying them not merely as musical compositions but as integral components of a communal heritage and the embodiment of an articulate collective expression.

WORKS CITED

DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Rockville, MD: ArcManor, 2008.

McIntyre Lawrence, Charshee Charlotte. "The Double Meanings of the Spirituals." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1987, pp. 379–401. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784158. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

Moore, LeRoy. "The Spiritual: Soul of Black Religion." *American Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 5, 1971, pp. 658–76. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712250. Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

Pershey,MG. *African American spiritual music: A historical perspective*. The Dragon Lode, 2000.

Taylor, William Marshall. *A Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies.* Cincinnati: M.W. Taylor and W.C. Echols, 1882.

Work, John W. *American Negro Songs and Spirituals: A Comprehensive Collection of 230 Folk Songs, Religious and Secular*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1940.