Dismal Picture of Human-Trade in Hannah More's "Slavery: A Poem"

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Abstract

Romantic women writers whose works have now faded into oblivion had no less contribution than that of the canonical male authors. Hannah More (1745-1833) was one of those prominent poetic voices of the Romantic Revival. My paper will endeavour to analyse her poem on abolitionist stance, "Slavery: A Poem" (1788). I aim to read the poem in terms of its portrayal of the deplorable condition of the African slaves perpetuated by slave traders and More's ways to extend sympathy to Africans and to inspire the same response in her readers. Umpteen numbers of Africans were trafficked and chained hand and foot to each other on ships. Shortage of space to sleep and insufficient water led them to anguish. Often such excruciating journey ended with death. Sometimes, these unbearable conditions produced transmittable diseases and required disposal of corpses on a daily basis. To address this inhumane practice, British women antislavery poets such as Hannah More composed sentimental verse to pressurize the government by swaying public opinion against slavery. The right of liberty is a natural law and cannot be limited to a group of people. In "Slavery: A Poem," More delineates the litany of injustices perpetuated by slave traders. She rails at them for their evil deeds and stresses the detrimental effects of being guided by extreme greed. Thus, More's literary contribution to the abolitionist movement emerges as a nation building text. By carrying out a close examination of the poem, I will try to discuss how liberty of the underprivileged souls is overtaken by the so called "polished" race by exercising sheer force while "basking in Freedom's beams" (Keen 322).

Keywords: Trading, Violation, Slave, Humanity, Sympathy.

In the past thirty years, 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" (Hemans 411). In the academe of Romanticism, the French Revolution has mostly been regarded the significant experience of the epoch,

signalling attention on the free individual with natural, inherent rights; however, happening concurrent to this and with equally profound influence was the Atlantic slave trade. Deep down history, it was the initiation of the plantation system in the West Indies that changed the scenario, for "demand for African slaves sprang most of all from the development of a system of plantation agriculture" (Rawley 13). The urge to go for 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" (Blackburn 344-345). Abolitionists intended to reveal the innate moral wrong of slavery through means of literature, legislation efforts, and freedom suits. Antislavery poets incorporated this issue into emotional verse in order to convince readers of the immorality of slavery through a particular set of themes. Female poets like that of Hannah More, Helen Maria Williams, and Ann Yearsley wrote in solidarity with the slaves. My paper will endeavour to analyse Hannah More's (1745-1833) poem on abolitionist stance, "Slavery: A Poem" (1788). I aim to read the poem in terms of its portrayal of the deplorable condition of the African slaves perpetuated by slave traders and More's ways to extend sympathy to Africans and to inspire the same response in her readers.

It was following the War of the Spanish succession, the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) which allowed Britain to provide slaves to the Spanish colonies. This contract granted the country a commercial opportunity to traffic human beings. Thus, by the 1780s, Britain was involved in the profitable business of the slave trade. Umpteen numbers of Africans were stuffed on ships and chained hand and foot to each other. They got barely anything to quench their thirst or take rest (LoGerfo 431). Official documents and accounts from slavers reveal that African's were simply packed into any vacant space. It was reported that often "the deck was covered with blood and mucous, and resembled a slaughter-house," and "on more than one occasion, sailors grew angry with them and beat them" (W.O. Blake 127, 131). The inhumanity, with which the slaver behaved with them is inconceivable whereas the monetary profit, they obtained, seems so vast to enumerate. For slaves, only corporal death seemed to be the closing of the agonizing journey as it was a destination beyond the clasp of slavers and observers. As mentioned by James Arnold, on a ship called the Ruby, some 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. (Dow 177)

Anyhow, if a shackled African were to remain alive in the Middle Passage, he would find himself a thrall in the New World, a cog in an economic machine, indispensable but entirely substitutable. Voicing in support of Africans, in 1787, the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade raised unrest through a vast petition campaign, the evidentiary propositions of William Wilberforce and others and William Pitt's resolution on the slave trade. Feeling empathy with the appeals of the Society and having his own 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" (LoGerfo 431). His outright focus was to the wretched conditions of the Middle Passage. 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. However, by twenty-first century norms, the Dolben Bill seems to be a mediocre step towards assuaging the slave trade. After much discussion and obstruction, the Dolben Bill passed the House of Lords on July 10, 1788 and got royal approbation the following day. This action is significant because, at least, 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. Here, the contribution of antislavery poetry was important for powerfully delineating the evil of slavery.

Among the canonical writers of Romanticism, no female poet was taken into consideration until recently. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth-century, discussions regarding women and their proper place in society were argued by many eminent personages like that of Locke and Rousseau, Astell and Aphra Behn, and, of course, Mary Wollstonecraft, who in her *A Vindication on the Rights of Women: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, famously compared an eighteenth-century English woman's societal position with that of slave. A woman of the eighteenth-century found herself defenceless in changing social scenario. According to the notion of separate spheres, men should manage the public sphere, administering to matters of economics and state, whereas women were convinced to 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 cultural sphere. However, women from the middle-class background 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" and thus engineered to achieve cherished abolition (Oldfield 7). Yet, Midgley refers that sometimes their signatures were considered to be aberrations to a few as to abate the effectiveness of the paper (Midgley 20). 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 the 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 other women and take them out of the solo identity—of a motherly housewife. They were known as the bluestockings. They met at informal gatherings and discussed over fashion of the day, significant literary subjects, social issues, 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 in all respects.

Talking over slavery, the canonical male Romantics acknowledged that it "was not only morally wrong and politically despotic [...] but psychologically destructive to the enslaver as well as the enslaved" (Baum 45-46). Among others, in the course of the dissention over the Middle Passage Bill, Edmund Burke descried 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"

(Anstey 110). This human trafficking is also condemned by abolitionists such as James Ramsay who remarked that it debased the hearts and polluted the minds of traders and merchants (Ramsay 17). 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. The larger number of historians emphasized upon 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 were eclipsed by active male abolitionists, and their struggle is not taken into consideration till this day. 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 postulate that women poets "were quick to make connections between injustices" to them and the enthralled (Ashfield 5). The approaches taken by white women to end the slave trade were through approbating abolition campaigns, bolstering ban on slave-grown sugar, and composing anti-slavery writings.

Hannah More made acquaintance with William Wilberforce in 1776 and became an earnest advocate of abolition. In fact, she began writing "Slavery: A Poem" in late December 1787 at the request of Wilberforce and the Abolition Committee. Obviously, she had in her mind the recent parliamentary debate on antislavery movement (Ferguson 150). 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 copes 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 understandings 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, emotional toll of the tragic bartering of humans.

Now, let us carry out a close examination of the poem with regard to 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" (Keen 322). 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 that leads them to engage in misdeeds. To promote her approbation for Africans, she again and again impeaches the slavers calling them "white savages" (More 15). Her intention behind this affront may be interpreted variedly. Firstly, she negates the entitlement they enjoy due to their position at the apex of global hierarchy. These ruthless men only crave for 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). More reproaches these vile men for plundering foreign lands and making profit on human flesh. She points out at 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 actually strived to end the slave trade, whereas the upper-class was the most benefitted by the slave as observed by Midgley as, "by the eighteenth-century [...] black girls and boys had become fashionable as unwaged household servants among the aristocracy [...]" (Midgley 9-10). As a believer of 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? (Keen 320)

More is loud enough to contend that it is insensitive humans who distort and fetter liberty. She unfailingly 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" (More 16). In the course of the Dolben debates, merchants tried out to divert public support for Africans and shift their concern to the shaky 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 death of innumerable Africans and subjects' women to sexual predation. More explicitly attests the emotional equality of Africans to their white counterparts. Imploring the slave traders to bring to an end of their violence, she lambasts them as:

> 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. (Keen 321)

Using her profession as a means, she urges slaveholders to transmit their zeal for betterment and identify with the feelings of helpless Africans. In her poetic diatribe, she cautions them to terminate this trade considering their own religion and ethics. Then, quite the contrary, she remarks that it is the absence of religious reverence to Christianity and formal education that make Africans "dark and savage" and "ignorant and blind" (Keen 322). This viewpoint in a way subtly attests 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" (More 10), 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. 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!
> Transmitted miseries, and successive chains,
> The sole sad heritage her child obtains! (Keen 321)

In this poetic space, More exerts her absolute authority. Her 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 aggrieved mother emphasizes 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" (Keen 321). Thus, Quashi is depicted almost Christ-like in taking his own life rather than that of his imprudent master, but more than that he is like 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 slaves, she becomes an epitome of the woman of feeling. Thus "Slavery" propounds More as 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 with the new advocacy for slavery and colour. She audaciously questions, "What strange offence, what aggravated sin? / They stand convicted of—a darker skin" (Keen 322). All men, according to More, should be free. No one can own a man, but a 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 heart tied to all that is home. She indicts those men who wrong with the African 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 own foresighted vision of the end of slavery wherein, "And *Faith* and *Freedom* spring from Mercy's hands" (More 20). Sadly, in reality faith and freedom do not prevail in

African and they continue to toil in the field and be separated from their wives and children. The condition of African women is more wretched than that of men. They are physically assaulted and consequently bear children that will be sold away from them and when politics become unnecessary, the entire concept of abolition will be left behind. More establishes that the benevolent God is not divided by any geographical boundary and His bounty is showered on all. Thus, at length, she has the courage to be vocal about what is right and wrong and she justifies it by saying it is the literal truth of scripture. As a woman, this is a daring and influential move. She is able to unbrokenly develop a space for her authorship that may be deemed as her distinctive feminist act, as regardless as it may have been.

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