

Online International Conference on "Continuity, Consistency and Innovation in Applied Sciences and Humanities" (ICCIASH-20)



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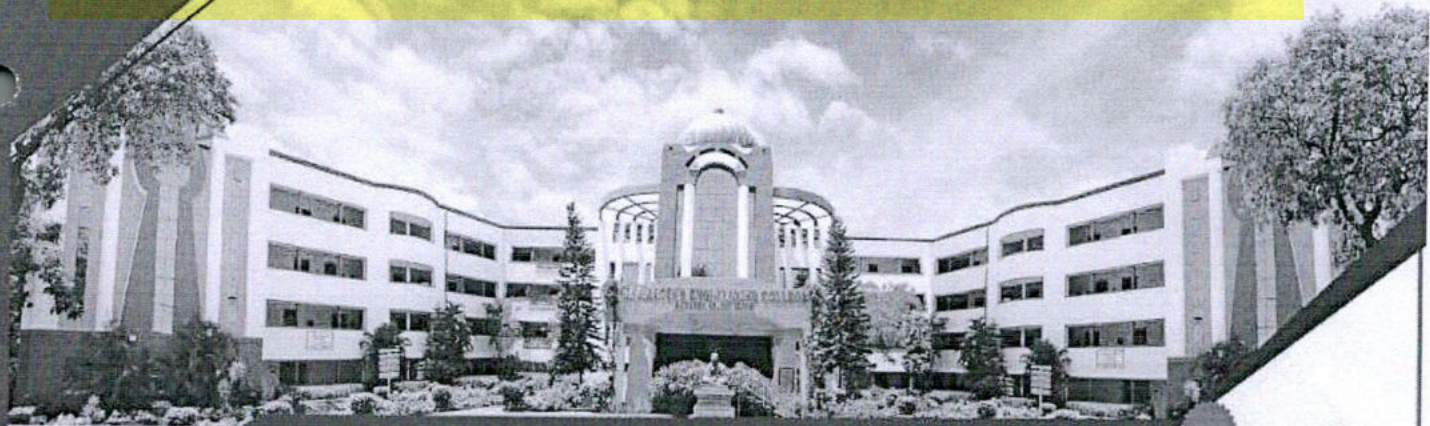
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THE NARRATIVE DISCOURSE OF IDENTITY, STRUGGLE AND LIBERATION IN NEGRO SPIRITUALS

Evangeline Richard
Assistant Professor
Department of English
St. Francis de Sales College
evangeline.richard21@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The African Music is one of the strongest definitions of the African tradition. This form of free music was methodically reconstructed into the Spirituals as the Negroes encountered the dehumanizing effects of slavery. The Spirituals conceptualized the realities of slavery and survival based on Hermeneutical and Theological foundations. The Negro Spirituals propagated a diverse segment to the African American identity. This form of music has proved to be a legacy of the African Oral Tradition, the Narratives. The documentation of these narratives resulted in the evolution of the Spirituals. This paper endeavours to explore and represent the 'Narrative Discourse of Identity, Struggle and Liberation in the Negro Spirituals. African life was inclined towards religion and religion was permeated into music and therefore, the paper delves to divulge the reflective elements in terms of its concealed messages and Biblical references. It also aims to endorse the reverberating voice of the Spirituals as the narrative discourse of the African-Americans, emphasizing the inhumanity of slavery.

KEY WORDS: Negro Spirituals, Tradition, Culture, Identity, Struggles, Liberation, Interpretation of songs, Biblical references, Slaves, Masters.

The African tradition of music is entwined to its pulsating culture that enclaves an exuberant voice of the African lineage. The perpetual aesthetic quality of the African Music resonates its originality in terms of its continuity in Gospel music. The Negro Spirituals, the body of folk songs, has its beginnings deeply rooted in its African Tradition with regard to music. The ancient tradition of African music is the characteristic representation of life in all its aspects. The music has weaved the disparate dimensions and sentiments to spin the fabric of interpretation. The African culture encouraged and accommodated music in different forms with regard to their then existing cultural expressions. The traditional Afro - centric profusion of occasions demanded the celebration of heart throbbing traditional rendition of music, establishing an explicit solidarity within the African community. The African music epitomized the community's expressions, a synthesis of music, dance,

poetry, history, folklore, celebration and songs of the soul. Music was fused into the culture as Simms rightly specified,

“It would be less than accurate to assume that the songs which Negroes sang as they worked out an adjustment to American continent has little or no relation to their African ancestry. Indeed, it would be reasonable to assume that the Negroes who had been imported to the American continent had their native musical endowment with which to begin the venture which was cultivated in the Spiritual.” [9]

The Negro Spirituals are more of a catalogue, mirroring an extensive range of messages along with Biblical narratives. Spirituals seemed to provide the slaves with a path to reclaim rhetorical power in their lives through an enigmatic mode of discourse. The uncanny imagery transcended words and lyrics, drawing out the implicit references to enslavement of the African Americans. Though music was a part of their past, the “Afro - American religious music seemed far superior because slaves used it to articulate many of their deepest and most enduring feelings and certainties.....it is to the Spirituals that historians must look to comprehend the antebellum slaves’ world view, for it was in the Spirituals that slaves found a medium....” [5] The distinctive element of development is significantly advocated in the community of slaves. The whites instigated ways to control the slave population through an array of oppressive measures. Slavery was a barbaric execution of power and the Spirituals overruled these barriers, transforming itself into a language exclusively comprehended by the slaves. The reality of Spirituals is the embodiment of the mental and physical anguish of the African - Americans, a bruised race.

Quincy Jones writes, “We didn't have writers, but we did have music, and the music was the vehicle to carry the remnants of black history. The true history of blacks is not in our history books, but in the music. Our history is all locked in the music and is passed down in its different forms through that music.” [4] The Negro Spirituals have drawn their prominence from their deeply rooted African Culture of music. They are the reflective notes of the African American voices and the amplified documentation of their life experiences under the dark world of slavery. The language of resistance and their obsession with freedom are entrenched within the Spirituals of the Africans in the American diaspora. As the slaves acclimated themselves to the environment of servitude, the dawn of a new language embossed with symbolic connotations and coded messages came to the horizon. The language is conditioned by the social status of the slaves that enabled them in creating unity among themselves. Foucault defines ‘Discourse’ as “the broad range of discussion that takes place within a society about an issue or a set of issues.”[1] It also probes how something gets talked about . The discourse of Spirituals is an indomitable attempt to define and structure their identity, affirming the presence of hope and desire to experience freedom on earth. Moreover, the narrative exhibits the exercise of hegemony reflecting the ruthless power of a knowledgeable society. Slaveholders harbored suspicions of subversion by the slaves with the unity of language and robbed them of their self asserting languages. Though the underlying conditions of slavery opposed the basic tenets of Christianity, the blacks adopted and Africanized the religion so as to identify themselves with Biblical Theology. In view of attaining freedom, escape bondage, receive redemption and have their masters meet judgement, the slaves, evidently espoused the songs of adaptation which is otherwise the

protest songs where the conception of resistance was subtle yet progressive. The textual composition of the Spirituals was the re-translation of Biblical events and characters, befitting their social identity as a slave.

The Gospel that was preached took the trail of the master's side, stating slavery to be an acceptable condition and that the slaves were bound to obey their masters who were interpreted as the supreme. The slaves were confined to their master's religion, the faith of Christianity, but their assemblage outside the churches was strictly monitored and controlled. This led the slaves to adopt the Theology of the Bible to convene in secret through Music. The equivocal mode of communication was a resistive instrument that sought the inception of a liberated world, a wake from bondage. The Spirituals were the signified component integrated with profound meanings by the signifier, the African Americans. A sense of new hope arose - "Living in very harsh conditions under slavery, they strongly believed the new religion would bring safety and help them be free from bondage." [6]

The centralizing power was vested in the white community and the slaves were under the panoptic territory of the whites. The Spirituals were replete with the language of symbolism and coded messages yet unidentifiable by the masters. McIntyre discussed the manner in which the Spirituals were operated -

"Basically Spirituals operated in a mediatory manner between masters and slaves. Masters believed that Blacks who sang Spirituals worked more efficiently and obediently. The introduction of Old Testament stories signaled the attempt of masters to rid slaves of African beliefs while teaching them a new doctrine of servility. The slaves, however, used the Bible stories to retain aspects of their traditional religions in the form and structure of their songs." [7]

The Spirituals, a monument of African culture, echoed the voices of a community that desired to be a part of the free society. The songs portrayed a rejuvenating spirit and although "Coming from a complex economic and social system, enslaved Africans were terrorized but not crushed by the horrors of the slave system in America. Despite the diversity which characterized several aspects of African life, black slaves possessed a sufficient heritage of common experiences which were enough to cooperate between them in the New World and to build new customs and new practices reflecting their African past." [6] The music invoked by the slaves represented the ultimate distillation of all the slave experiences while strengthening their sense of self-worth. St. Paul in his letters to the Romans articulated the art of focusing beyond suffering and achieving hope which is very much applicable in the life of the slaves who passed through the dark waters of slavery, enduring to experience the rising sun of liberation. The ingenuity of Negro Spirituals was to break the hegemonic structure of slavery and denounce the denial of freedom. The Christian faith was brought to the slaves in the form of the 'Word', the Bible. However, the interpretation of the 'Word' was such that it served the master's best interests. Masters ingrained into the slaves, the concept of obedience and total submission, failing which they would meet punishment according to the master's judgement.

The masters attended the church and were moved by the language of the Bible which they did share with the slaves to acquaint them with Christianity. The slaves appropriated this language of the white church to communicate through music about anything and simply go undetected. The plaintive voices of the African Americans were endowed with music that culminated in the Spirituals. The Bible, their experiences and the

world invigorated their minds with the creation of a universal language of communication with metaphorical expressions. The Spirituals, in a sense, raised their spirits of endurance acquiring a scintillating quality. Frederick Douglass, a slave himself, disclosed in his autobiography, the nature of the Spirituals -

“They were tones loud, long and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.” [2]

The Spirituals, in some sense, have rightly served the enslaved Africans in terms of representing their world and is a manifestation of a culture that considers the past, lives the present and plans for the future. It has encapsulated the slaves’s love for God, desire for freedom, justice, salvation, redemption, disdain for slavery, secret meetings and escape plans. The Music of the Negroes,

“Is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope.” [8]

The Spirituals have emerged as the articulation of the slaves’ sorrow, anguish, hope and the univocal determination for freedom. The slaves were plunged into an alien system of life wherein these fervent songs carried them throughout. The adaptation and Africanization of Christianity are attributed to the musical narratives of their lives. Moore recounted the image of Biblical references as “The New World African found in the Bible prolific materials adaptable to the traditional dramatic statement and occasionally, to the epic treatment. He felt impelled to translate and recast Biblical events into a dramatic form that satisfied his sense of what was fitting. The stories of the Bible thus transmuted, became vivid images or, sometimes, poetry.” [8] The Biblical depiction of characters like Daniel and Job represented the hand of God that saved them from tragedy and led them beside ‘still waters’ as the Psalmist David mentioned in *Psalm 23:2*. The slaves were relegated to their social context of bondage that evidenced a parallel situation identifiable with the Biblical event of slavery in Egypt according to the Old Testament. The African Americans learned that God heard the cry of the Israelites and equipped Moses and Joshua to lead them out of slavery into the land of Canaan - a land flowing with milk and honey. The slaves believed that the Christian God was a God of justice and would bring judgement and punishment on the slave masters while granting the slaves redemption and salvation. Spirituals affirmed a complete trust in God and this granted them a sense of security during their tempestuous times.

Negro Spirituals was a medium to vent out their feelings of degradation, alienation and subjugation through metaphorical construct. Some of the metaphorical interpretations of the Spirituals revealed are:

“bondage=slavery; Satan=slavemaster; King Jesus=slave benefactor; Babylon=winter; hell=farther south; Jordan=first step to freedom; Israelites=enslaved Blacks; Egyptians=slaveholders; Canaan=land

of freedom; heaven=Canada (north); home=Africa. Like the Red Sea that Moses divided, Blacks wished to cross the Atlantic to return to Africa.” [7]

The Negro Spirituals also fabricated the message of escapism. Some of the Spirituals evoked the images of transportation in relation to the freedom asserted. A good number of popular songs like ‘Steal away to Jesus’, ‘Wade in the Water’, ‘The Gospel Train’, ‘Good news, Chariot is coming’, etc. are rendered as a secret invitation to freedom by interpolating the Biblical analogy. Anytime there was mention of travel, wheels or chariots, it was an implied reference to escapism. The song, ‘Swing low Sweet Chariot’ would refer to the Underground Railroad directing the slaves towards liberation and ‘the band of angels’ is a marked allusion to Moses like characters - the conductors, coming to help.

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry he home

I looked over Jordan and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home
A band of angels coming after me
Coming for to carry me home [10]

The Underground Railroad was initiated by the abolitionists who helped runaway slaves to escape. Harriet Tubman was alluded to as the black Moses who was very much instrumental in leading the slaves towards the North which portrayed the crossing over Jordan to be emancipated. In the plantation, if the slaves heard the song ‘Go down Moses’, it intimated the arrival of Harriet Tubman who conducted the slaves to the Underground Railroad where they had to get onboard. The songs, on the outset, resounded like a talk of life after death but little did the masters realize it was of their life on earth. The Spirituals contrived the path to freedom which led to communal unification of the slave workers.

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt’s land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To let My people go!

When Israel was in Egypt’s land
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go! [10]

In the light of emancipation, they sang songs integrating the elements of battle, punishment and destruction. ‘Joshua Fit the battle of Jericho’ is a song constructing the concept of battle and victory. This implicated the intensity of determination towards an unfettered world through the Biblical account of Joshua who fought the battle of Jericho with the Israelites blowing the trumpet until the walls came tumbling down as a mark of their victory. The slaves craved to pass the message of how the master’s land was not their real home but the one over Jordan. Their liberation meant crossing the Atlantic and songs such as ‘Roll Jordan Roll’ and ‘O wasn’t that a wide river’ recorded this through concealed Biblical references.

Roll Jordan, roll
Roll Jordan, roll
I want to get to
Heaven when I die
To hear Roll Jordan roll

My brother you ought
To been there
Yes, my Lord
A sitting in the kingdom
To see Roll Jordan roll [10]

The concept of 'Home' meant attaining freedom or going to the North. Interestingly, Negro Spirituals proffered information regarding the escape plans and prepared the slaves for their journey. The lyrics of 'Follow the Drinkin Gourd' was more of a coded map that referred to the constellation, the Big Dipper that points to the North sky, leading them on their destined path. The Negro Spirituals were a response to the vicious nature of slavery as deliberated by Fredrick Douglass, a slave himself who wrote songs of anguish and deliverance. He stated in his narratives about the Spirituals being instrumental in persuading him to fight the battle against his social condition and march forward. Though there were times he failed in his attempts, he pulled himself through it, reflecting the obsession of a slave to be a freeman. Douglass also extended the proposition of resistance against oppression and slavery, the language that heightened the determination of the Negroes.

The Spirituals also propagated the slaves' affinity towards Jesus Christ as they could vividly draw comparisons with his struggles and sufferings. Their identification and affinity with Christ was assimilated in songs such as 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord', 'I want to be ready to walk in Jerusalem just a like John', 'Do Lord, Oh do Lord, Oh do remember me' and 'Tis me O Lord standing in the need of prayer'. They held onto the Christian faith that strengthened them as "Enslavement relegated slaves to the status of nobodies. That negative form of existence contradicted God's creation of a special people to be His children. Slaves viewed themselves as God's children, the chosen people of their time, analogous to the Israelites of ancient Bible times." [7] They also believed that their pain and anguish was nothing when compared to what Christ went through. This kindled their spirits to keep moving forward and not give up on themselves or their fight for Liberation.

Some songs chronicled the struggles of the physical world - the brutality of slavery. Songs like 'Nobody knows the troubles I've seen' and 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child' resonate the dreadful life of servitude. In 'Songs of Sorrow', W. E. B Du Bois stated, "They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways." [3]

'Identity' is a notion influenced by self and boundaries framed by the society with regard to various aspects. Negro Spirituals have created history that accords to the reconstructed identity of the African Americans. The black Spirituals were born through the white church and it employed a new language that rendered their identity. The conversion of the slaves to Christianity provided them a context to establish the new self, replacing their oppressive status. The identity of the Africans - customs, traditions, music, family and languages - was

completely deprived. This depravity led to the spark of a new identity that was assimilated in the Spirituals. Hegemony and the exercise of brutal power led to the re-defining of 'the self'. The implied intransigence of the slaves forged the communal unity in the world of suffering. The expansion of Negro Spirituals has contrived the new dialect of communication and served as a channel to attain freedom from the clutches of their masters. The slave masters presumed the slaves were deprived of their aesthetic culture and thus did not pay heed to their songs, flooded with hidden messages. A sociolinguistic comprehension of the Spirituals would reiterate the images of their myriad reflections of identity and their trajectory towards freedom which renders the reconstitution of their identity. The structure, pattern and lyrics of the slave songs endorses their new form of identification. Self expression is a tool to define the 'self' and the modification of that definition frames a new identity altogether. Negro Spirituals are associated with the social binding of the slaves in view of being liberated with the death of slavery. Self identity was hegemonized by imposed identity and through the Spirituals, a new identity was woven.

The incoherent message communicated and procured, reinforced the unification of the Negroes that is adhered to the spirituals. The path of suffering and endurance has rescripted their identity. The Spirituals fed on the creation of the identity and their affirmation towards freedom. Feelings, songs, sufferings and the idea of liberation were the intrinsic factors that asserted their transcendental identity that transcended the master's level of comprehension. The African American identity was well articulated through the Spirituals and the power integrated in the Spirituals advocated the identity of the black folks. They chose a pathway to redefine themselves and visualize the image of what they desired to be.

The dark experiences of the Negroes have become an expression to the world to build and rebuild people's faith and the hope of freedom from their challenging life. The film '12 years a Slave', directed by Steve McQueen, developed its plot based on a true story. Solomon Northup, the protagonist, was sold into slavery and had lost his identity as a freeman. The white society reconstructed his identity as Platt, a fugitive slave. He used the language of music to rid his pain and anguish as he played the violin while one of the slaves was sold and separated from her children. He also voiced, "I don't want to survive, I want to live", which demonstrated his labour and battle towards acquiring his individuality as a freeman. The Spirituals were perceived to be an instrument of empowerment that cemented their desire to be part of a free world. The Spirituals, as presented in the movie, were sung in the plantations while working and over the death of one of their fellow members, cohering to the fact that they would cross Jordan and be free from the servitude in the world.

The Spirituals is an exemplification of the black identity in the context of slavery. They have drawn references from the Biblical Theology aligned with their tradition that holds it together which renders it with a unique quality. Moore raised the fact: "Here was a religion which could give to the slave-no, not give to him, but evoke in him-an inner fire when all else was bleak and cold, a religion elevating him beyond the tribulations of daily existence to realms of glory, to a direct experience with God, almost a fusion of the soul in God, bypassing all intermediaries and in this case the black man's worry was not priests, bishops and kings, but masters, overseers and driver." [8] The new identity is complemented by narrative expressions of the Spirituals defining their status in the society.

CONCLUSION

Music evolved as part of African tradition and mirrored the facets of life. The Spirituals were therefore an amalgamated version of life, death, hope, freedom, identity and struggles. It was directed to strengthen the African Americans who under the bondage of slavery sought redemption. The Spirituals expounded the voice of African liberation, struggles and the reconstruction of their identity. The narratives of the Bible were transformed into oral tradition of songs resulting in the Spirituals. Therefore, it is the narrative discourse of the Negroes that amplified their challenging journey through the path of slavery in hope of experiencing freedom. As Foucault illustrated the work of power through discourse and how far they shape one's reality, the power of the Spirituals worked through the narrative discourse that shaped the reality for the Negroes. The identity of the slaves was constructed by the white society whereas, the Spirituals acclimated a new identity assimilating disparate elements. The orality of the blacks is the rhetorical discourse that textualized the Spirituals to reframe the identity of the African Americans. The Negro Spirituals will continue as a community expression of the African American identity and aesthetics.

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