

A Pursuit for Identity and an Outcry against White Culture Authority in Rita Dove's Poetry

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Abstract:

Rita Dove, though belonging to the narrow limitations of African American literature, is a poet who achieved great praise and international appreciation for her works. she stresses in her works the concept of black identity. The works have their own uniqueness and creative touch that highlights the quest for identity in Rita Dove. It is in fact, her spontaneity and apt informative content with which history and culture are being glorified at the outset. Dove wishes to bring out and expose to the world about the difficulties faced by black literature amidst American culture. The traumatic lives of black slaves in America are also portrayed by Dove in a vivid manner. The slaves have been deprived of their rights and even their voice has been curbed and were treated very badly. It was Dove who in her works has pulled out from the grave the agony and torture of the black people by means of her poetry.

Keywords:

Identity, black literature, domination of whites, wounds, trauma

Introduction:

Identity can be referred to the distinctive characteristics of a person or a group of people. It is well known that human beings are in one way or the other, being confined to several social categories. To develop one's identity becomes a necessity in one's life. Every human being receives an identity from the moment of birth, through his or her name. It is in fact the name that differentiates one from the other in a society. Likewise, in America the blacks always wished to remain in their identity, but they weren't allowed to do so. They were suppressed

and marginalised badly. They had been deprived of their rights and lived a torturous life of pain and agony. Rita Dove, herself holding the black identity wishes to stand for the black people by highlighting their sufferings. Dove has exposed in her works about the tabulations and miseries of black people in America in a realistic manner. The poems of Dove expose the pain of these slaves who had bore these sufferings both physically and mentally. In fact, Dove's poetry had served as the voice for the voiceless people. These unheard voices were given life and their agony and feelings had also been highlighted by Rita Dove through her poems. On reading the poetry of Rita Dove, one could witness the sufferings and the sentiments of the black people who had lived a pathetic life. Therefore, Dove's poetry served as a medicine that healed the wounds of the black people.

Discussion and Interpretation:

Rita Frances Dove who was born in 1952 in the city of Akron, Ohio was very fond of reading and writing from her childhood and holds a strong bond with the literature of the world. She became the first African American poet to receive the Fulbright Scholarship to study in Germany. She started writing poetry during her childhood but began to be noticeable when she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for her poetic creation and creativity. She is a connoisseur of art, literature and music and holds her Masters degree in Fine Arts from the University of Iowa. As an erudite scholar fond of travelling, she has great interest in history and the cultural diversity across the world.

The period of Harlem Renaissance was the time when Rita Dove appeared in the literary criteria. Her works hold a strong grip and her creative power had an impact of what it is to be a black in the American society. Dove had also born witness to the Black Arts Movement and had brought to light their pathetic lives. Gates and Mc Kay in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* state that, "The Black Arts Movement tend to transform the manner in which people in the United States of America were defined and treated" (18). Slavery and humiliation were the unending wounds of the black community. This however transformed them into lifeless beings rather than humans. Justice had been biased, discriminated had to be faced along with the torments and pain. All these made the blacks feel hopeless and cornered badly. Everywhere in the American society the blacks had to face similar situations. As Arnold Rampersad states in "The Poems of Rita Dove" that "Dove sees poetry, its dignity, nature and functions, in a way, quite different from most of the writers who came just before her" (53).

Several of Dove's poems present the cruelties of slavery and its aftermath incidents. Dove wants her readers to know about the pitying condition of the blacks in America. As Roland Barthes mentions in the treatise called *Historical Discourse: An Introduction to Structuralism* that "Historical discourse is essentially a product of ideology, or rather imagination if we accept the view that is via the language of imagination that responsibility for an utterance passes from a purely linguistic entity to a psychological or ideological one" (253). Dove's intention was to expand the condition of the black people by focusing on their past, in order to bring about and build their present lives. In a strange culture of America, the blacks underwent the trauma of slavery and are longing for identity and go on in search of it. This creates a bond that unites the blacks in America.

Dove's poetry acts as a reminder to the white people by making them realise that they are the ones who are responsible for the tortures of the black people. The injustice done to the blacks by the whites remain as an embarkment in the history of America, which can never be erased in the minds of the black people as well as in the pages of literature. Dove's poetry acts as a historical treatise that has painfully been written exposing the harsh realities of the blacks in a chronological manner.

Dove's first collection of poems entitled "The Yellow House on the Corner" deals with popular historical figures and also expose the condition of the slaves. The poems "Belinda's Petition", "The Transport of Slaves from Maryland to Mississippi", "Kentucky" etc. reveal the hardships and adversities of the slaves. The poems of Rita Dove not only expose the relationship between the blacks and whites, rather it highlights the behaviour of the whites, their arrogant attitude towards the Black Americans. In the poem "Belinda's Petition" the event is that of a real incident that took place in America. The portrays a slave who files a petition availing freedom. An African woman Belinda who had been kidnapped, was sold as a slave to a white man in Boston. Belinda however is a brave woman who wasn't ready to undergo the tortures of her master. Therefore, in order to free herself she files a petition expressing her pain of being a slave and the trauma she had to undergo during the time. She was feeling devastated both physically as well as mentally. She puts forth her plea and says thus,

I am Belinda, an African,
since the age of twelve a Slave.
I will not take too much of your Time,
but to plead and place my pitiable Life
unto the Fathers of this Nation. (3-7)

It is to the American government that Belinda pleads, thereby evoking sympathy on reading the poem. She states that she cannot protest against the government as she is a mere slave. From the age of twelve she has been caught in the web of pain and hardships. All that she can do is to plead from her heart. Dove, in a satirical tone capitalises the words “Country”, “Slave”, “Time”, “Life” and “Nation” to stress her intention to comment on the American government is a very powerful country that has gained self governance from Britain. Dove states that such a country should provide justice to these slaves and free them from the clutches of the whites. Dove states,

Lately your countrymen have severed
the Binds of Tyranny. I would hope
you would consider the same for me. (8-10)

Belinda pleading to the American government represents the entire community of the blacks. To evoke sentiments, she refers to them as “Fathers of the Nation”. Dove’s arrow aims directly at the heart of the American people who think very high and humane of themselves. Dove, through the voice of Belinda exposes the trauma in a very pathetic manner and this leaves the readers teary-eyed while going through the poem. Dove has given a true picture of the slaves who have lived a life under chains.

“The Transport of Slaves from Maryland to Mississippi” is another poem of Dove that highlights the sufferings of the black slaves in America. There is a touch of history entangled with pain and agony. Dove begins with an introductory note that states “On August 22, 1839, a wagonload of slaves broke their chains, killed two white men, and would have escaped, had not a slave woman helped the Negro driver mount his horse and ride for help.” However the persona replies,

The skin across his cheekbones
burst open like baked yams –
deliberate, the eyelids came apart –
his eyes were my eyes in a yellower face. (7-10)

The lines clearly impose feelings of sympathy over the black slaves in a so-called democratic America. The poem acts as a satire against people who blindly believe the supremacy of the whites. Dove’s courage and endurance to expose such strong themes is also worth appreciable. In an interview, Dove states that “I found historical events fascinating for looking underneath – not for what we always see or what’s always said about a historical event, but for the things that can’t be related in a dry, historical sense” (229). Likewise, in the poem “The House Slave”

Dove has thrown light upon a slave working in a plantation field. In the line “At the second horn, / the whip curls across the backs of the laggards” (8-9) the life of a slave under the inhuman and brutal masters is revealed explicitly. The master punishes the slave by using a whip. Dove’s lines instil a hope that the blacks held in their hearts that there will certainly come a day when they will see the fruit of freedom. Jap Preet Kaur in his book *Reaching Centrestage: Cultural Identity in African-American Theatre* states that, “Slavery for African-Americans is not an experience that can be confined to the past, placed in time, which they can, once and for all, come to terms with and then go on with their lives. It is something that starts all over again whenever oppression is experienced, remembered or forgotten”(44).

Conclusion:

Rita Dove is not just an eminent poet but is a multi-linguist who holds a strong grip in German language also. Her poetry embellishes with varied literary devices and rich use of imagery to bring to the forefront the condition of slaves in the alien culture of America. The sufferings and tortures which the slaves had undergone and the wounds inflicted upon them by the whites show to the world the real face of American culture. Dove is a person who is extremely proud of her black identity. Her poems tend to put an end to the tyrannical rule of whites over the blacks. A number of poems bear witness to what it is to be a black among whites. Therefore, the present paper explores the conditions of the black people who hold a profound history and live a silenced life of African Americans. Dove’s poems dwell deep in the pain of the slaves and thus pictures a realistic depiction of the American society of white supremacy.

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