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Pau Lawrence Dunbar's *Harriet Beecher Stowe* and *We Wear the Masks* Represent the Life of Slaves Post Abolishment of Slavery

Rupali Aware

LVH College, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Nashik, Pune, India

Swapnil Satish Alhat

Lecturer, Department of English

LVH College, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Nashik, Pune, India

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3668-6484>

Abstract

In all the civilizations there has existed slavery of one or the other form and it had acceptance from the contemporary society. If you are a slave then there is nothing you can do about it you will have to bear it meekly. The American slaves were different, they were brought there from some other continent and their look and physique were also different than the Europeans settled in America, thereof their rights were ignored and assumed that they did not have any rights. Nonetheless when the slavery was abolished from America there was revolt and civil war took place. But no one thought about the slave's livelihood post abolition of slavery and this is where Dunbar comments upon. His poetry throughs lights on this aspect of the former slaves and their kids, they were free but did not have any skill or way of livelihood. In this present paper I would endeavour to trace this aspect of Dunbar's poets.

Keywords: Slavery, Abolition, Harried Beecher Stowe, We Wear the Mask, Impact of Slavery

Introduction

Slavery is an undeniable reality of the American Society. How so ever America project herself as an inclusive, developed and fighting for human rights but she cannot do away from her history. Many movies are made and novels have been written describing about the lives of slaves during slavery, their suffering and atrocities done on them but not much literature is available on how the life of slaves post abolishment of slavery. Paul Laurence Dunbar's most of the poems voices the lives of slaves post abolishment of slavery.

Representation of Life of Slaves Post Abolishment of Slavery

Harried Beecher Stowe

She told the story, and the whole world wept
At wrongs and cruelties it had not known
But for this fearless woman's voice alone.
She spoke to consciences that long had slept:
Her message, Freedom's clear reveille, swept
From heedless hovel to complacent throne.
Command and prophecy were in the tone,
And from its sheath the sword of justice leapt.
Around two peoples swelled a fiery wave,

But both came forth transfigured from the flame.
 Blest be the hand that dared be strong to save,
 And blest be she who in our weakness came-
 Prophet and priestess! At one stroke she gave
 A race to freedom, and herself to fame.

-(<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/africam/afpo33at.html>)

In the poem *Harriet Beecher Stowe* Dunbar shows his gratitude towards Stowe. It was Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1952) informed the whole world the dark side of the slavery and the lives of slaves. She was the first one to boldly write about the slaves and their plights furthermore directly or indirectly her novel made the impact not only on common people but likes of Abraham Lincoln, who was determined to abolish slavery from the American soil.

In the poem Dunbar never mentions the name of Harriet Beecher Stowe rather he uses pronoun she. He says that it was she who told the story and the world came to know about slave's plights. When she had written the novel the slaves might not have had the idea that a lady was speaking on their behalf because most of the slaves were illiterate. Hence, Dunbar, through this poem, shows the gratitude of all the slaves. He also saluted the courage of Stowe for speaking her mind: *But for this fearless woman's voice alone, / She spoke to consciences that long had slept:*

Freedom is the most important thing for the humans but for many years no one paid any heed towards the freedom of the slaves, they were given inhumanly treatment, did not consider as human. It was Stowe who gave the message of freedom but her message was not accepted by everyone. The Southern States of contemporary America revolted against the abolition of the slavery and the civil war took place. After the Civil War there emerged a new America, totally transformed and transfigured: *Around two peoples swelled a fiery wave,/ But both came forth transfigured from the flame.*

In the last four lines Dunbar shows the gratefulness on behalf of the all the former slaves. He says that she should be blessed as she has shown courage to talk about us, she came to rescue us when no one wouldn't. He further gives her the status of Prophet, the saviour of slaves, who freed them from the shackles of slavery. Stowe did not fight for the slaves she just wrote a novel describing the life of

slaves and that was enough, the slaves got their freedom:

*Blest be the hand that dared be strong to save,
 And blest be she who in our weakness came-
 Prophet and priestess! At one stroke she gave
 A race to freedom, and herself to fame.*

Dunbar in this poem seems to thanking Stowe on behalf of the all the former slaves, because they were not aware that a lady wrote a novel about them and that novel triggered the movement against the slavery. Here he also acknowledges Stowe for speaking for them.

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
 This debt we pay to human guile;
 With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
 And mouth with myriad subtleties.
 Why should the world be over-wise,
 In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.
 We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
 To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
 Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
 But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

-(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44203/we-wear-the-mask>)

We Wear the Mask describes the lives of the Slaves Post Abolishment. The speaker of the poem apprises us about how the former slaves were living their life. Were they happy they got freedom? And people in general were also very curious to know about the status of the life that now they were no longer slaves they were free, so how were they enjoying their freedom?

So the speaker informs us that they all wear the Mask of happiness when someone asks them about their lives and they lie with those people faking smile because they had to do it to show the world that they were happy after the abolishment of the slavery. Did their lives changed? No! because the abolishment just gave them freedom, what about jobs? They had neither education nor any skills for employment, they just got independence, they were just free. This pangs of life, their suffering they cannot afford to show to the

world because the world was under the impression that they were slaves earlier and now they are free, but none thought about their livelihood. Therefore, to hide their plight and sorrow they wear the mask of Happiness and Lie, to hide their inner pain: *This debt we pay to human guile; / With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,*.

They do not want that world be more concerned about us. They were free now and can think of themselves thus people must not be worried our lives. Yes they wanted freedom from the inhumanly treatment but they also wanted some kind of work for their livelihood, no one paid heed to that: What would be their life once they got free? Hence the speaker says: *...let them only see us, while / We wear the mask.*

In the last stanza of the poem the speaker prays to Christ and wishes that the world was blind to their inner feelings and needs but they hope that Christ would not be, he must be aware of their pain and plight. They are aware of the struggle of their life and also that they will have to fight their own battle of life hence they hide their feelings and pretend to be happy.

Conclusion

Paul Lawrence Dunbar was the first-generation poet post-Abolition era. He was well aware of the impact of slavery and its abolishment on the mind of the former slaves and their kids. Therefore, there is undercurrent of this in his works. The former slaves were in dilemma whether to be grateful and celebrate their freedom or to die of hunger and displacement. In the present paper the researcher attempted to trace the life and sentiments of erstwhile slaves reflected through the Dunbar's poem.

Author Details

Rupali Aware, MA II Student, LVH College, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Nashik, Pune, India

Swapnil Satish Alhat, Lecturer in English, LVH College, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Nashik, Pune, India
Email ID: www.swapnilalhat@gmail.com, runimatingmind2022@gmail.com

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