

Black Poetess, White Poems: Phillis Wheatley

A Case Study of Hybridity

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The history of racism in America traced back to the discovery of the New Continent by Columbus. The slave trade started and black men were taken and deported obligatory to America as slaves used for the sake of servitude for the colonizers. They lived in misery and suffer from slow starvation. They were granted as commodities for White Americans only. The black had no rights and they were expected to work all the day disregarding their physical ability or their healthy status. They remained so until the outbreak of the civil war that extended from 1861 to 1865, between the South and the North. The northerners won the war. Only then Black slavery ended in America. Despite the fact that Slavery was abolished in the 1860s, its negative traces continued. The black as any colonized remained incapable of assimilating themselves into the White Superior American Culture, especially in the South.

American racism is seen and witnessed in every aspect of life like education, voting rights, citizenship, immigration, and so on. One of the most racist aspects was that of education. The essential division according to colonial standards is that white are superior to black and they won't interact with each other. The majority of the Blacks was miners, carpenters, soldiers, or enrolled in industrial works like being labors in factories, doing tiring and unskillful jobs. In addition, their living standard was low. But in 1968 The Civil Rights Act declared that the Blacks had the same opportunity as the White to choose their living conditions. Generally speaking, the Black still suffer from racism and social discrimination. (Ellis)

In Boston, on 1761, Phillis Wheatley, was sold as a slave to John Wheatley of Boston. Phillis Wheatley is one of those slaves who were brought to America since childhood, at the age of seven, as she was kidnapped from her parents by force in Africa and brought to serve her colonizer masters. The ship namely Phillis embarked from Africa, Senegal, carrying hundreds of innocent and civilian blacks to be used inhumanly in America as servants "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". (Said 3)

Fortunate enough, the Wheatley family treated the African girl kindly especially Mrs. Wheatley, Susanha, who recognized that she is an intuitive girl whose talent should be taken care of. So they passionately help her to read and write by supporting her education. With constant care and encouragement of the family, she starts to know and communicate with high rank people who admire her poems. Phillis mastered Greek and Latin in addition to various branches of knowledge most importantly her interest in the holy book as reflected in many of her poems in terms of biblical references and allusions. The Wheatley family offer Phillis at the age of eleven a chance of her life when they send her to England to pursue her dreams in writing and publishing her poems. So she travelled with Nathaniel, the son, where she met Thomas Woolridge, October day in 1772, a British businessman and supporter of William Legge, the Earl of Dartmouth, asked her to write a poem in which she expresses her desire to be freed from the burden of slavery. The poem was her starting point as a privileged and distinguished poetess. She criticizes the negative impact of colonial power upon slaves in

England and America. Wheatley asserts that she yearns to gain her freedom that comes from being a slave and describes being kidnapped from her parents, comparing the colonies' relationship with England to a slave's relationship with a slave holder:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe below'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

This poem is one of her published book in London in 1773 entitled, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. She is describing the ugliness and brutality of the colonizers who kidnapped her from the lap of her mother and native family in Senegal. She criticizes the tyrannical colonial powers that ruin the lives of innocent and civilian people. The poem is characterized by its bitter and sad tone of an enslaved baby needs for motherly carcasses and warmth, yet this is her destiny which she has to embrace it passionately as she keeps praying to overcome such a tragic event in her life. In the poem she uses her poetry as a tool to claim her simple rights as a child being treated inhumanely.

Certainly, most of Phillis Wheatley's poetry is generally typical of the American Enlightenment in that it is rhetorically, but not sentimentally, public. Her poems' themes are political, their mode allegorical, their language formal, their images classical. They appeal to public emotions--patriotism, love of a great cultural tradition, emulation of public figures--rather than to communally shared private emotions. They certainly contain

very little evidence of "sensibility," of sensitivity cultivated for its own sake. (Finch)

The poetess is the first "slave female who becomes a published poet" she belongs to the first wave of the African writers to write about the plight of her fellow-slaves. Despite being enslaved by the whites, Phillis's destiny served her to be adopted kindly by the white family members unlike other slaves who were deprived of their simple human rights under the severe, harsh, and unbearable reign of slavery

One of the most important themes threading through Wheatley's poems is the burden of racism which serves as a unifying agent in all of her racial poems she gives Identity to the poetry of the Negro writing in trying to establish Africa as a literary home land for the Negro creative artist. As a prominent writer she begins writing her short poems. The success of her Published poems opened the horizon for many opportunities: "Following the publication of her book, much of Wheatley's contemporary recognition rested on her relationships with world leaders in the abolitionist movement in England, Europe and the American colonies" (Hill et al 93). But due to being influenced by the white educational system, any keen reader may notice easily that the poetess followed the colonizer's pattern in her way of writings and even in her poetic reflections to the Christian religion in the sense that she achieved her spiritual reconciliation after the awful experience of being kidnapped and enslaved. According to many postcolonial critics the wavering between two opposed edges i.e. being a black following white standers would eventually lead to an identity crises and hybridity.

It is worth noting that Wheatley's poetic works might be confusing to the readers when analyzing them one may feel timid to understand the complexities which, has made her distinguished from the rest of other fellow African writers. This challenging style of her poetic writings enables the reader to grasp fully the poems with a kind of both curiosity and excitement to find more about her contradicted world. The poetess did not really live the sever and harsh colonial power, yet she did not waste

a chance to write about her homeland and at the same time she may criticize it adopting the white's point of view. Such ambivalence in the way of thinking may produce hybrid characters who are swaying between two poles – binary opposition- the East and the West. The complexity of the situation is the natural outcome of colonial power that leads to “The Double Consciousness” of any perplexed colonized person. The poems are concerned with a variety of social issues such as systematic racism and black selfhood combined with gender and class themes. Also, explore more general themes such as American history (Bloom 89); it situates this history in terms of personal identity and the nature of the relationship between the self and society (Bigsby 375). It is true that after the civil war the black people finally gained their independence and citizenship but their sufferings continued because of discrimination and legal segregation of ‘Jim Crow Law’ (Terrilland and Cooper 579). This law forced the blacks to find separate schools, parks, restaurants, and even cemeteries. In the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, blacks were living ‘behind the veil’ and in order for them to prove their identities, they should be educated to break this law. Du Bois’s term ‘double-consciousness’ which describes an individual whose identity is divided into several facets. These facets bring about the existential tension between a black man and the ideals of the whites which appears when the black man comes into contact with the values of his surrounding American environment (11).

Early African Americans were longing to see their original homeland Africa, and they saw America as the land which repressed their cultural identity. They were torn between their Africanness and their Americanness, though they were not treated as Americans, or seeing themselves as African only. As a result, African Americans suffered from the duality of identity and the crux of hybridity. Phillis’s life itself is an example of double-consciousness and ‘otherness’. Her works show a conflict between her black self and the self that she wants to be in the white society. She believes that the white society is preventing her from loving herself or feeling as a complete woman since she is a black female poetess resulting in double consciousness. Although the Wheatley family loved and cherished her as a member of them, Philips was not freed by her master only at

his bed death. Then she married a free black man, yet her happiness did not last for she started another phase of suffering which is the early death of her three kids. She strived to survive and overcome the tragedy of her kids till her death drenched in poverty and misery.

Astonishingly enough, the denial of her real identity and black race is not only indicated in her poem *On Being Brought from Africa to America* but also, apparent and clear attack against her indigenous culture when she describes her native homeland in terms of “Pagan” and backward. The poem revolves around the creation of a new religious enlightened girl and the consequences of her spiritual journey. She is crediting the white for having mercy upon her when offering her salvation as she underwent the journey from Africa to America. As if the voyage to the new continent reflects a spiritual path to heaven leaving behind a hellish milieu. The role of the machineries is also implicitly referred to by the poetess who impacted Africans to convert to Christianity and leave everything behind. The colonized has internalized their feelings of inferiority and dealing with it unconsciously. “there is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over oriental backwardness” (Said 7).

Ironically, the colonizers men of religion are described as “saviors” who in fact used religious dogmas to control the colonized easily, hypnotize them, and wash their brain as a result blacks blindly obey. Besides De Bois’ term, one can also use Fanon’s words to describe phillis condition of identity crisis and hybridity resulting from her dual consciousness; as a black woman whom ‘has been given two frames of reference within which she has had to place herself, metaphysics, customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that she did not know and that imposed itself on her’ (110). Some critics interpreted her poem differently beseeching her excuses when using words like “pagan and diabolic” stating that she is expressing what the white think of them which means she is mirroring the white’s image about the black race in her poem, yet in both images Phyllis undermines her fellow citizens of Africa. “Arthur P. Davis points out that race consciousness is

the most pervasive personal element in Wheatley's poetry”(Finch)

"Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.(1-9)

The poetess is fully aware of the inescapable color burden in the white society and to what extent they were treated with disdain for something they did not choose i.e. being black. However, and within all these contradictions she states at the last line “May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train” that this journey may offer her spiritual reconciliation in the angelic train. She shows the difficulty in choosing between the ethnocentric white culture and the black ethos. The poem means to how difficult it is ‘to become a [black] in America’ (213). She tries to construct an identity that preserve and conserve her left behind heritage in white patterns and forms as a means to bridge the everlasting gap between the East and the West. She is trying to advance herself in the white society and gain her freedom to be equal with her masters which sounds to be a dream at that time . The human psyche needs dreams because they represent one's active search toward self-improvement which is necessary to continually reconsider the status and value of one's existence (Altman 23). Psychologically speaking, dreams and their realization are important to the poetess especially because she suffers from racism. In the aforementioned poem Phillis tries to identifies herself as a black colored person in relation to the whites which reflects her double- consciousness as defined by Du Bois as a “sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness.” (2-3) she dedicated her poetic talent firstly , to reflect the “view of art for life’s sake” unlike the African American writers who are endeavoring to gain their freedom and civil rights . Secondly to fight the colonizer back throughout using their religion,

language, and cultural references to move them, she says in her poem:

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,
And thee we ask thy favours to renew,
Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,
To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.
May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
To all thy works, and thou forever live
Not only on the wings of fleeting Fame,
Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,
But to conduct to heav'ns refulgent fane,
May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God. (32-42)

One of the recurrent themes or ideas in her poems is religion. She addresses the colonizers using their religion to move the human sense emphasized by Bible that may awaken conscious to emancipate the slaves and put an end to their agony. Specifically, in the lines above she is talking about Legge who supported her in England and praises him in the sense that he has been very sympathetic and kind to her and recognized as anti-slavery figure. She describes him as “great Sir” to express gratitude for British colonizer finding a way of communication with the slaves at a very critical time characterized his age. The poem is a personal and confessional in which the psychological and emotional crises redeemed when attaching the self to God. Spiritual salvation achieved when dropping all temptations of life and attach wholeheartedly to the divine power that illuminate our life. As a female black poet, Phillis’s poetry is seen mature in every part. Still, she is torn between what’s she is expected to be according to the standards of the whites and what is her placement as a black woman in a white society. Such struggle affects her ability to comprehend her true-self and to reconcile the two sides of her identity “she simply wishes to make it possible to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.”(Du Bois, 2-3) Consequently, she is obliged to have “double souls,

double thoughts, double unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Bois, 11).

The plight of Phillis as a colonized who lives in the third space or in-between is exemplified in her poem *His Excellency General Washington* in which she praises the triumph of America over Britain. She celebrates the American Revolution in a highly elevated language and thickly plotted way to impress them. She uses allusions and symbols skillfully to the extent she coined Columbia goddess, a symbol of freedom and liberty of a country enslaved her and deprived an entire race of his simple rights is celebrated by an African poetess.

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast
alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving
light
Involved in sorrows and the veil of night!(20)

Unlike most of the Africans as slaves to America announced the emergence of African American literature due to the harsh living of the Blacks and their marginal status, they started writing down their suffering in writing; they found an outlet and relief from the pressure of the life they led as labors in cotton fields. Phillis writes for the sake of the white man who kidnapped her and proved to be responsible for unjustifiable military operations to shed bloods of innocent people in many places in the world. In *The Origins of African American Literature*, Dickson D. Bruce Jr. describes the harsh status of the Africans saying that "at various times and in various places, Africans in North America faced systems of slavery and freedom that were both oppressive and permeable, often at the same time. They were encouraged to think of themselves as part of a larger American colonial society but as people expected to remain at that society's margins"(1) So, the reader is introduced to a society that denies the presence of a

black man simply because of his skin color and his race. The racial affects him psychologically that he doubts his existence.

It is a scholarly axiom that colonization produce perplexed people who are in between without having clear cut stand or loyalty neither to their indigenous nor the new one. The case is similar to Wheatley who from time to time speaks about homeland and the atrocities of colonization brought to them and then she shifts to idealize the colonizers i.e." Anon Britannia droops the pensive head", "Great chief" referring to the greatness of Washington. Westerners always looked down upon easterners, yet easterners idealize and hail them similarly to the poem. In the lines below the word "freedom" is used to indicate the democratic system of the colonizer who in turn keep enslaving and exploiting the blacks. The dilemma of a man who is in search for his identity under the condition of racism..

One century scarce perform'd its destined
round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
While round increase the rising hills of dead.
Ah! Cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
Thy ev'ry action let the Goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! Be
thine.(21)

Some of the poems carry the theme of racism as a subject for social discrimination others hail the colonizer role in one or another. Even in her usage of allusion she keeps referring to the Greek and Latin despite the fact that her original Yuropa deity is rich with mythical allusions that are concerned with African identity. Some critics considered her early education influenced her poetry whereas others claim that she has to dedicate her literary works to serve a "Nobel Cause" which is the celebration of her heritage. However, Phillis proved to be a brilliant poet

throughout the hybridization of her literary forms and contexts. She could not escape the burden of her skin complexion and had to assimilate herself and poetry in the white context to deliver her implied messages about racism, agony, and tyrannical experience she has been through. It is worth noting, that the poets of the Black Art Movement did not consider her as a real representative of her culture rather an imitator of her masters, the white colonizers.

To sum up, the black literature started and sprang along time ago, yet the horrible outcomes of colonization played a pivotal role in triggering the potentials of some talented writers like Phillis Weately to write and express their unbearable agonies under the harshest racial reigns in America and England. Weately tried as much as she can to present an African colonized image to the west in a neatly, professional way that might bridge the gap between the east and the west. Being brought up by white family since kinder guard, she exerted much passion towards the white who adopted her as a black female and a gifted poetess as well. So belonging to two cultures may mold her personality as a hybrid one, yet this hybridity in Phillis case led to her fame and a deeply carved name in the history of both African and European literature in the sense that she left a very rich legacy to be studied and examined thoroughly every now and then.

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