
ESCAPE FROM PHYSICAL LABOUR AS DEPICTED IN THE PLANTATION TALES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR LITERATURE

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Abstract: African American literature is a rich collection of literary works that has a continuing impact on readers across the world. The vernacular literature of the African Americans is of the earliest of origins and gives a good perspective of the lives of black slaves in the white plantation. Many tales about the life in plantation were orally narrated and later even received printed form. Among these is a collection of tales which could be categorized as plantation tales in which slave John is usually the protagonist. He represents all the African Americans enslaved in the plantations of South America. In such plantation tales, the desire to escape physical labour is emphasized. This paper tries to analyse this theme. What was the need for escape? What are the means sought to escape? and how did they escape? are the questions that are studied and answered. Moreover, a comparison between the escape sought in the trickster tales of the black vernacular literature and the plantation tales is made. Since the vernacular literature of the African Americans preceded any other form of literature from the Blacks, a study of the plantation tales of this literature reveals the miseries the African Americans were subjected to in the new land and how they survived during the early days when Civil Rights Movements and protest rallies were unimaginable.

Keywords: Plantation Tales, vernacular literature, slave John, physical labour.

African American Vernacular literature includes folktales, gospels, spirituals, sermons, secular songs etc. The vernacular folktales include trickster tales, plantation tales, tales about society and conflict, tales about beliefs and superstition and the like. The plantation tales are about the life of the enslaved slaves in the cotton fields of South America. The slaves were subjected to ruthless manual labour and were dispersed and scattered across various cities. They had to undergo both physical and mental trauma. In such a milieu was born the plantation tales that were initially narrated and shared among the black community. Later, these tales gained world wide popularity when they were put to print. These tales talk about the injustice meted to the black slaves and also condemn the prejudiced law and order system that allowed the Whites to even kill the blacks and walk away freely. With even the judicial body being against them and living without the hope for freedom, the tortured Blacks found solace in telling stories to their community. These tales gave them relief and helped them prolong their existence in an estranged society. Usually the central character in these plantation tales is slave John. This is the common slave name used in most of the tales. He is depicted as a hard worker who often has to deal wisely with his greedy and vile master who cheats, beats, abuses and mistreats him. It is also true that not all plantation tales have John as the protagonist. In general, plantation tales are named so because of talking about the life of the Blacks in the plantation and not for having the protagonist exclusively as slave John. This paper analyses the desire of the Blacks to escape physical labour. A study is made on the factors that aroused this desire. What sort of escape they

sought? How could it be achieved and what in reality they achieved are analysed. Put to manual work in the white plantation, the Blacks sought to escape the hard and merciless physical labour they were subjected to. Not that the Blacks were not used to physical labour, but the toils and struggles that accompanied their labour forced them to seek escape. Blacks were forced to work in the White man's field for no return. Some were resident slaves who stayed in ruined cottages near the fields and had to wear their day out for a morsel of bread. Some Blacks, however, fared better because they were sharecroppers who worked in the plantation on an agreement to share a portion of the crop they raise. Even such sharecroppers were exploited and cheated. The White landowners would usually have a major portion of the share and leave the Black sharecropper in want. Such pathetic conditions forced the Blacks to find solace by telling tales in which, the Black man is often referred to as John and the ruthless White masters as

“Old Massa (Old Master),” “Old Boss,” “Devil” etc. In addition to working without pay and giving away most of what they had raised in the fields, the Black also had to tolerate lynching and, at times, even death without any justification. They were also asked to work round the clock all days of the week making life tiresome. Even credentials were sought from them to become sharecroppers. In the tale John Divides the Crops John tells the land owner, “Boss, these calluses is my credentials and as to being stupid, anyone can tell you I'm sharp man to come and sharecrop for you.” (African American Folktales 124) The calluses in his hands were a result of his hard labour in the plantation for several years.

Therefore by seeking an escape from physical labour, they also wanted to escape these atrocities and physical pains. Throughout the vernacular literature, one feature is common. These escapes may be either real or imaginative. Some really wanted to escape by displacing themselves physically to the industrial North and many sought temporary reliefs by getting their heroes in their tales to escape their cruel enemies. Thus, telling stories and celebrating their folk tale heroes' victories gave momentary relief. Escape is Vindicated the Vernacular fables which include trickster tales, had their central character as a weak animal, usually a rabbit, which outwits its more dominant enemies. On the other hand, the plantation tales have a person named John as the central character. Unlike the vernacular fables, plantation tales have real life accounts. John seems to be a very common slave name used in the black vernacular literature. He is the black hero who is subjugated to hard physical labour. Unlike the rabbit of the trickster tales which manages to escape through unlawful means, John's actions are justified and approved. The fables propagated the idea of escaping by cheating or playing tricks (unlawful means), the plantation tales promote the idea that the means of escape should be vindicable and acceptable. The rabbit uses its wisdom to cheat its tormenters whereas John uses his wisdom to outsmart his tormenters. The rabbit tales emphasize that escaping the tormenters is more important than the means. Since the Whites were ruthless in their treatment of the Blacks, doing the right thing did not matter in the trickster tales. But, the plantation tales call for justifiable deeds that add moral dignity to their heroes. Though ill-treated, John is patient; though harassed, he is dignified; though exploited, he wins with good moral conduct. Sufferings Everywhere In the tale Mojo, the old boss wakes John to work in his field on a Sunday morning. John defies his instructions. He would have met a Mojo man (a doctor with magical powers) and got a wish to change himself into a rabbit, then a quail (a small bird) and finally a snake. John thinks with the help of these magical powers he can escape his master's whippings and also refuse to work for him. When the master comes with the whip, John rushes out of the house as a rabbit. But what he would not have expected is his white master also using the services of the Mojo man to turn into a greyhound and chase him. Obviously, the greyhound is fleet-footed than a rabbit and closes in on the rabbit (John). Seeing this, John changes into a quail and takes flight. There too, the White boss comes as a hawk to hunt him down. Finally, John hits the ground again as a snake only to be beaten up by the Master who turns into a stick. Ultimately, the poor slave ends up being whipped. He

is chased hard on the land and in the sky. He cannot hide himself from the grasp of his master. Wherever he goes, he suffers; whatever shape he takes, his master follows him as a dominant hunter. This sure is like a fantasy tale, but the angst of the Blacks to escape endless hours of physical toil and merciless whippings is explained with subtlety. For the Blacks, fate too plays an important role. If it was smart work on the part of John to get these powers, it was his fate that his master still chased him as a predator. Avoiding the exploitation of talent The trickster tales talk about the weaker animals fighting against stronger and dominant ones. The plantation tales, on the other hand, talk about dealing with life's hardships. Devils and demons are frequently referred to in these tales to explain how horrible life was in the plantation. The tale How? talks about John dealing with a devil. The devil intimates the White master that he has come to take John's life. Even death is permissible to the plantation slave only after the approval of his master. The master responds saying,

"Please don't take John... John is my record keeper... I can ask him about my crops and what I made last year, and all I have to do is tell him and I call him back and ask him what I made and how many bushels of corn and what have you, and John has the answer."

(From *My people*, 48). He wants to retain John not because he loved him, but because he would lose stock of his accounts. John possessed phenomenal memory, but this was used for the benefit of his alien master. In the plantation, such exploitation of personal talent meant, the Whites were beneficiaries and the Blacks sufferers. By escaping physical labour, the Blacks can also escape the wastage of their talents. Moreover through the devil imagery, the tale explains that life in the plantation was like facing and negotiating with death personally. These struggles compelled Blacks to seek escape from physical labour. Temporal or Eternal Escape? Escape from physical labour could be temporal or eternal. While many blacks sought temporal escapes, i.e., escape from toils while living in this world, many also sought eternal escapes, i.e., escaping from this world and flying away to a new world, probably heaven. The tale *All of God's Children Had Wings* revolves around this theme. The author calls all Blacks as God's children who possessed the ability to fly. He says,

"Once all Africans could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions, their wings were taken away."

(The Norton Anthology, 103) In this tale, the plantation labourers are killed with overwork in the summer heat. They work from sunrise till sunset and even beyond. A young woman who would have just borne a child is forced back to work even before she

could recuperate. The mother is not allowed to stop her work to feed her child even. This young mother asks an old man in the plantation a question, for which she is replied,

“Not yet, daughter; Not yet” (The Norton, 104).

She waits patiently and tolerates beatings and whippings from the slave drivers. Finally, when her time comes, she flies away along with the other Blacks working in the field and the old man who spoke to her. They fly beyond the wood, beyond the river, miles away beyond the last rim of the world and disappear. In this case, the allegorical implications of Blacks having wings and taking flight suggest the need for a supernatural force, possibly God to help them. Till the destined time comes, the slaves are asked to wait and suffer patiently. The slaves in this tale wait for the day of their flight to a different world. This anticipation for a better world gave them some momentary relief and the strength to carry on. Their escape is not temporary but permanent and eternal. Legal Escapes For an escape, efforts from the slaves and at times, the benevolence of the slave owner too was required. There are instances when the master would promise to free the slave after the completion of a work and at the completion, break the promise. Sometimes masters do keep their promises and the slave manages to go free. Such escapes were legally approved and, of course, earned with great effort. In the tale, ‘Member Youse a Nigger John the plantation slave saves his master’s children from drowning. To reward him for that, the master promises to set him free the next year. When the time comes, the master keeps his promise and John sets out on his road to freedom. Unlike most masters, John’s master loved him. His family too loved him. They cry seeing their favorite slave leave. The masters calls after John saying, “John de children love

yuh...John I love yuh... And missy like yuh” (The Norton, 108). John replies, “Yes, Suh” and keeps progressing. No amount of convincing could prevent him from escaping the toils of the plantation. It is not just words of love that the master uses to convince him, but also warnings. He says,

“But ‘member John, youse a nigger”.

He reminds that he is a Black and cannot thrive in the White man’s land. In spite of the cries of love and noises of warnings, John keeps progressing suggesting that a battered Black man’s desire to escape the struggles in the plantation was unquenchable. John moves towards Canada hoping for a better living. Such escapes are not stealthy but open accepted and hard earned. John could only count him fortunate to have set free.

Conclusion: An analysis of the plantation tales in the Black vernacular English reveals that the desire of the African Americans to escape lynching, whipping, exploitation, endless hours of toils and ultimately slavery was as strong then as their desire to escape the atrocities of racism now. By escaping the struggles they face in the plantation, the Blacks could create and secure their own identity. By making their wrongfully treated hero patient, morally right and justifiable in his actions, the vernacular folktales show how much the Blacks valued good character. Moreover, by putting their hero in vulnerable situations and causing him to come out victorious the Blacks were able to communicate to the world that they were smart, knowledgeable and equally good as the Whites. They were also able to celebrate their hero’s victory as their own victory. In short, the plantation tales have helped the Blacks continue their life in the new world and also create an identity for themselves.

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