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## A STUDY OF THE MARRIAGE IMAGERY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN SELECTED AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR FOLKTALES

M. ANISH ALFRED VAZ

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**Abstract:** African American vernacular tales originated as oral tales during the days of slavery in America. While they talked of the sufferings of blacks in general, the curious case of black women was often ignored. Certain tales, though, talk of the struggles and plight of black women. It is expressed clearly through the marriage imagery. This imagery highlights the power struggle at home, the helplessness of black women, the challenges faced by them and their longing for a unique identity. Marriage is seen as cell that confines black women. The same imagery is used to talk of the brutalities of slavery too. This paper studies the marriage imagery and its implications in four black vernacular folktales, namely, “De ways of de Wimmens,” “Sis ‘Coon Shows Brother ‘Coon Who’s the Boss,” “The Seventh Son,” and “Mary Bell.”

**Keywords:** brutalities, marriage imagery, power struggle, vernacular.

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**Introduction:** As far as African American Literature is concerned, escape from slavery, human tyranny, physical toils, conjurations, ghosts, evil spirits, curses and magical spells gains importance. In fact, escape and displacement are two ever present features in black literature. Usually, African American literature talks of blacks trying to escape the clutches of whites. While doing so, the curious case of black women is often ignored. Black women suffer multiple subjugations. As blacks, they are lorded over by the whites; as women, they are treated as inferior to men and as black women they are further subjugated under black men. The African American vernacular folktales, which are of the earliest of origins, throw light on the condition of black women. These tales, initially created in “broken English,” resulted in rich a collection of stories that were unique and quintessentially black.

In their oral stories (folk tales), the African Americans sang of their sorrows, encouraged one another, shared secret messages, reminisced their native land and even gave hope for their tribesmen to live and survive in the new land. While many tales talk of black deprivation in general, some tales talk of the condition of black women. The institution of marriage which binds a man and a woman as husband and wife is used as an image in certain tales to give voice to the rights of black women. The same imagery is used to talk of confinement and at times brutality. This paper studies the marriage imagery and its implications in four black vernacular folktales, namely, “De ways of de Wimmens,” “Sis ‘Coon Shows Brother ‘Coon Who’s the Boss,” “The Seventh Son,” and “Mary Bell.”

**Main Body:** The institution of marriage unites a man and a woman as better halves of each other. In due course, it automatically elevates the position of man as the head of the family. Women, necessarily, are required to obey their heads, i.e., husbands. In the

tale “De ways of de Wimmens” the status of black women is discussed. In the social hierarchy, men are placed higher than women, and consequently, enjoy hierarchical supremacy over wives. It may be argued, God designed it that way. But this tale goes back to the very same story of creation where God creates Adam and later brings Eve as a helper to him. The author tailors this story to his convenience to illustrate his point. In this tale, God says, he created both man and woman equal:

“De Lawd frown den. “Adam!” he say. Is you trying to criticize de Lawd? Course you’s of de equal strength. Dat de fair way to make a man an woman so dey both pull; in the harness even.” (“De Ways” 251)

After creating them, the Lord puts them in a beautiful garden in which there is a house. The trouble begins there. When the woman asks man to fix the stove while she hangs the curtain, he refuses. This results in a scuffle in which, neither of them wins because God has created them equal. Following this, the woman starts howling and blabbering which terribly upsets man. He is not able to howl like her. He thus approaches God for a solution. God makes him more muscular and stronger. He thus uses his prowess to show himself as the boss in the house. In turn, Eve following the counsel of the devil obtains the keys for the kitchen and bedroom from God. Now she alone can open them. She thus gets man to cut wood and patch the roof to open both these rooms. The story, though funny, tries to place both men and women at the same level. Though intimidated by man, the woman still finds a way to dethrone him. By holding the keys of the kitchen and the bedroom, the woman establishes her supremacy at home and thereby sends man to find supremacy in the world outside. Moreover, the woman also gets the man to use his physical prowess to complete certain manual labors instead of employing it against her. All these are achieved by being smart and wise in spite of her

limitations. Her wisdom helps her equate with man and therefore avoid domination.

As much as blacks, in general, sought to escape from severe treatment, so much did the black men, in particular, want to escape impending family responsibilities. Many African American writers have talked about black men abandoning their families. The vernacular folktales which supposedly are of earlier origin too talk of this trait. Commitments and responsibilities were seen as burdens which were mercilessly thrown off. Such negligence affected the helpless families to the extent of putting them in misery. Many African American children lived with a single parent (usually the mother) or without parents. Steven Ruggles in his article "The Origins of African-American Family Structure" states that "From 1880 through 1960, black children were two to three times more likely to reside without one or both parents than were white children." (Ruggles, 136) Black husbands often left their wives destitute. Women had to run the family individually or at times, take up the responsibility of steering the family all by themselves even while the irresponsible husband was around. Husbands could do so by stating that men were superior to women in family relationship and women were obliged to listen to men. The tale, "Sis 'Coon Shows Brother 'Coon Who's the Boss" talks not only about the hierarchical supremacy enjoyed by husbands over their wives, but also how this supremacy allowed them to shun and even escape from fulfilling their responsibilities. The tale also highlights the shift of power in the family. In the tale, both brother raccoon and sister raccoon leave their children at home and go for work. Taking advantage of this, brother bear enters their house and scares the children off and eats up the victuals in the house. There is a domestic problem and brother raccoon decides to fix it. But, when he too flees seeing the more powerful bear, he asks sister raccoon to stay back the next day and handle the bear. He dictates to her saying, "Ain't you my wife? Then you do like I tell you." ("Sis' Coon"<sup>103</sup>) The traditional attitude that women have to oblige to men is inherent in brother raccoon. He chooses to escape. While brother raccoon has the option to escape such family and social responsibilities, sister raccoon has no other option. This hints at the fact that many women had to find solutions for domestic problems while men could choose to avoid. The following day, sister raccoon stays home and manages to split the bear's head with an axe. This tale suggests that women deserved prominence at home because of their ability to find solutions for domestic problems. While men could choose to walk away carelessly, women could not and therefore were prominent at home than men. The tale ends with the note that from thence, brother

raccoon dared not to order sister raccoon and ended up being a henpecked husband.

While many black husbands sought to escape family commitments by transferring their responsibilities to women, some husbands sought to abandon their children and many times their families altogether to escape their commitments towards them. The tale "Seventh Son" begins as such, "An old man had seven sons. And he was an old woodchopper, and he came to the conclusion that he couldn't feed them." ("The Seventh Son," 110). This tale is similar to the Hansel and Gretel story which is of Germanic origin. In the Germanic tale, the second wife of the woodcutter convinces her husband to send away the 2 children born to his former wife, but in this tale the woodcutter himself decides to send away the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> son away. A family with seven children is a typical Black family which was usually large. The father is a woodcutter by trade which again required a lot of physical exertion and yielded very little income. The condition of the Blacks in America was similar to this. They had large families but little resource to sustain them. Unlike the Hansel and Gretel story, the playwright makes the father as the person who decides to escape his commitments because it was common among the blacks. Then the story follows the usual course. The children are left in the forest miles away from their home and are subject to misery and misfortunes. They travel through the woods and reach the devil's house. The plight of the African American children is explained here. They are forced to choose the options available to them and not explore additional options. When the wife of the devil says that she can lodge them there but her husband had the habit of eating little children, the seventh son says, "We might just as well get eaten up by your husband as to get eaten up by the animals in the woods." ("The Seventh Son"<sup>111</sup>). Fathers escaping family commitments forced black children into the extremities of life. It was like lodging in the devil's house itself though being aware of the dangers of it. Could they make better decisions? Were other options available? The answer could be "no". As Victims of their circumstances, many black children grew up as uneducated and stricken by poverty. Al Calloway, a long time journalist working for South Florida Times, in his article "What 'American People' Are They Talking About, Exactly?" observes, "Single-parent, female-headed households ballooned into a majority for poor and near-poor families throughout black America."(sfltimes.com)

In addition to being poor, many black children ended up in the streets committing crimes. While talking about the ways to stop the increase in drug addicts and prisoners among blacks, Heather Mac Donald, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute argues in her

New York Times article titled "The Value of Mom and Dad," "The most powerful antidote to this violence would be to ensure that more black children were raised by both their father and their mother." (nytimes.com) However, in "The Seventh Son," the boy escapes the clutches of the devil and returns home with a lot of wealth. The tale ends with the son driving his father away from the house with the following words,

"You didn't love your children enough to work for them and keep them, but you took them out in the woods where the wild animals could eat them, and you left them there all by themselves ...Now we don't need you. Let all fathers be aware how they treat their children."(112) This sure is suggestive of saying irresponsible fathers who shy away from their commitments deserve no mercy. The abandoned son abandons the escapist father.

Whatever tale the African Americans told, reference to fleeing white domination and escaping the tyranny of the slave owners always found a place. The tale 'Mary Bell' talks of a woman (Mary Bell) escaping from her demonic husband. Here, marriage imagery is used to highlight the slavery system in the new land. Mary Bell is given in marriage to a demon who feigns to be a handsome bridegroom. Tales such as "Courtied by the Devil," "Married to a Boar Hog," "The Devil's Bride Escapes" etc. talk of brides given in marriage to demonic husbands and the attempts made by such enslaved wives to escape their husbands' clutches. In "Mary Bell," the demonic husband takes his wife to his house which is a typical haunted house. Being displaced from her house (homeland), she feels trapped in her husband's house (foreign land). She sees heads of women up and a cast of blood in her husband's house ("Mary Bell" 65). The demonic husband is also addressed as "Massa by the rooster in the house. These characters typify certain people. The demonic husband typifies the white slave owners who are often referred to as a "devil" or a "massa". The displaced Mary Bell reminds of the displaced blacks who were enslaved in bizarre circumstances in a foreign land. The corpses in the husband's house are images of brutality that remind the readers of the sufferings of blacks in the white man's land and Mary Bell's desire to escape back to her house signifies the longing of the Blacks to escape the cruelties of the Whites and may be get back to their own homeland, i.e., Africa. While escaping to the industrial north seemed a good solution for many of the enslaved African Americans, going back to their own homeland too was considered. As early as 1787, Prince Hall, a noted and tireless African American abolitionist supported and strove for African emigration. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, an

African American historian mentions of Prince Hall's efforts as such:

"In fact, he represented a group of seventy-three "African Blacks" who in 1787 presented the General Court of Massachusetts with a plan for resettlement in Africa due to the "disagreeable and disadvantageous circumstances" that attended life in the United States."(Moses, xv)

Mary Bell too, one day, decides to escape back to her home. She mounts a horse named 60 miles (it covers 60 miles in every leap) and heads back home. The demonic husband makes her escape tough by chasing her on a horse named 50 miles. Though he catches on her thrice, she drops a magical needle each time to create a barrier between her and him and thereby slows him down. Finally, the tale ends saying, "He catch at her. She step into her father's house." (65) Though this is a tale that talks of an escape of a woman from a demonic husband, it highlights the anxieties and the living condition of the blacks in the foreign land. The institution of marriage is used as an image of confinement. The wife who, supposedly, is weaker than the husband and is expected to obey him decides to break free. Mary Bell, easily identified with blacks either had to be confined by this bond of marriage or take the chance of breaking free from it. She does not feel obliged to stay under him because he had cheated her by feigning to be a good groom. Finally, to realize her freedom and escape her demonic husband, she flees back home. Home is where, some blacks felt they belonged. For them, Africa was the place where they felt at ease. Africa was their homeland and therefore would like to get back there to escape torture.

**Conclusion:** On analyzing these four tales, it is evident that the marriage imagery has been used to talk of power struggle at home. The tales "De ways of de Wimmens" and "Sis 'Coon Shows Brother 'Coon Who's the Boss," ascertain that, at home, it is the wife who enjoys supremacy. These tales give voice to black wives and also earn them an identity. Wives are said to have solutions to domestic problems. They hold the keys to the kitchen and the bedroom and husbands have to go out into the world to assert his supremacy. The institution of marriage is also used to highlight the abandoning and escaping attitude of black men. They often desert their families leaving women helpless. The tale "Seventh Son" through the act of discarding the father who could not take care of his two sons ends up pronouncing judgment on such fathers. Moreover the image of marriage is used to talk of escaping slavery too. The story of "Mary Bell" talks of a woman being married by a devil. It metaphorically implies the system of slavery in America in which blacks are bound to their white masters like a wife being wedded to a demonic

husband. Instead of remaining bound, Mary Bell, the wife, escapes back to her homeland. Thus to escape slavery, escaping the white masters stealthily was also

propagated. The marriage imagery is used to talk of brutality and ruthlessness of the slavery system.

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M. Anish Alfred Vaz/ Assistant Professor of English/  
 Ramco Institute of Technology/  
 North Venganallur Village/ Rajapalayam- 626117/  
 Virudunagar District/Tamilnadu/ aavaz2000@gmail.com