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Slavery and Colonisation in the Poetry of M. Al-Fayturi and Langston Hughes

Introduction

In “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality,” Aijaz Ahmad celebrates the efforts to designate the contemporary literature of Africa as postcolonial, and thus to make it available for being read according to the protocols that metropolitan criticism has developed for reading what it calls minority literature.¹ Integral to Ahmad’s thesis is an attempt to find common ground between postcolonial and minority literatures which could be pursued in the black poetry tradition in Africa and the United States.

Taking Ahmad’s argument into consideration, it becomes relevant to combine the

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In addition to minority and postcolonial considerations, blacks in Africa and the United States are bound to each other by their common colour and their tragic legacy of slavery and oppression. They also share a history of suffering and an ancestral memory of agony and pain reflected in their literatures and folklore traditions. In “Black Nationalism Since Garvey,” John Bracey establishes an analogy between the black experience in the United States and the history of the black people in Africa:

The black experience in America can be viewed as similar to the colonial experience of blacks in Africa, the West Indies, and Latin America. The historical process in these areas—colonization, resistance, accommodation, nationalism, decolonization, nationhood—is operable in Black America. The corresponding historical continuum in America, then, is colonialism (slavery), 1619-1865, colonialism (imperialism), 1865-1963, and decolonization, since 1963.²

In *Rebellion or Revolution*, Harold Cruse affirms Bracey’s argument by drawing a parallel between the circumstances of Africans under western colonisation and the black experience of racism and slavery in the United States. In his discussion of what he calls the state of “domestic colonization” of blacks in America, Cruse argues:

It is not at all remarkable then that the semi-colonial status of the Negro has given rise to nationalist movements. It could be surprising if it had not.³

The similarity between the African and the African American experience of racism, slavery and colonisation leads to the emergence of black nationalist movements which have their roots in African and American history:

Black nationalism has deep roots in American history. Black nationalism as a body of ideas and a pattern of behavior stemming logically from the colonial relationship of Black America to White America is both a response to colonial subordination and an affirmation of the existence of an alternative nationality and set of values.⁴

image of an idealistic , pre-colonial Africa was integral to the emerging feelings of ethnic pride among African Americans at that time.

Incorporating African images and revealing a longing for a return to roots, Al-Fayturi, like Hughes, evokes Africa in idealised terms. Both deal with Africa as their Zion, a Moses-like homeland; nevertheless, Al-Fayturi's Africa is different from the Africa of his black American counterpart. As a result of centuries of colonialism and slavery which have disenfranchised him, Hughes is aware of the impossibility of returning physically to Africa. Therefore, his treatment of the African motif is coupled with a sense of homelessness born out of the feeling of being persecuted in the country where he lives, a victim of the legacy of racism and slavery. However, Hughes shares with Al-Fayturi a feeling of ambivalence toward Africa, because both of them are racial and cultural hybrids suffering from alienation and an identity crisis determined by psychological, socio-political and cultural factors. While both of them are psychologically split between their ethnic origins and their place of birth, Hughes's identity crisis is deeper because he suffers from what DuBois calls "double consciousness." DuBois refers to the crisis of being both black and American, of living in a limbo without a sense of belonging to either America or Africa:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this 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 twoness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹²

Whether the loss of identity is individual or ethnic, the person subjected to such an experience usually fights ferociously to avoid being lost in the labyrinth of cultures. Therefore, Al-Fayturi considers himself an African poet; thus he affirms in the

introduction to his anthology that his poetry is devoted to Africa and black people in and

identity. In *Aghani Efriqya (African Songs)*, he identifies himself as a black African who is ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of his homeland:

I am a Negro
I will not allow the white enemy
to occupy my Africa
I am a peasant
and Africa is my land
I have irrigated her soil
with my blood.¹⁵

Indeed, Al-Fayturi's poetry is a reflection of the complex interplay of revolution and the constructs of racism and slavery. His poetry is seen as a project for collective freedom and empowerment, and an agent of revolution and regeneration. Devoting his poetry to Africa, he considers himself as an African poet who attempts to blur the boundaries between Africans, Caribbeans and other black people elsewhere in the world. Absorbing the literary heritage of African poets such as "Leopold Senghor and Christopher Okigbo in addition to the works of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright,"¹⁶ Al-Fayturi is able to merge elements of poetics and historical fact and create a sense of immediacy in his treatment of a people in crisis. However, part of his poetry aims to reveal a glorious African past, devastated by the colonisers

compares Hughes's depiction of the African-American ghetto to the image of the Havana ghetto, the *barrio*, in the poetry of the great Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, affirming that Hughes's blues poetry and Guillén's folklore poems are rooted in rhythm patterns integral to ancestral Africa. In addition to similarities in narrative patterns, states Spicer, *son*, a Cuban dance, "was to Guillén what the blues was to Hughes."¹⁸ Therefore, "the memories of Havana are exchanged with the memories of Harlem" in the poetry of these two great poets.¹⁹ In the same vein Melvin Dixon in "Rivers Remembering their Source: Comparative Studies in Black Literary History—Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain and Negritude" compares Hughes with the Caribbean poet, Jacques Roumain, arguing that both of them are influenced by the African American folklore tradition. Dixon points out that in the poetry of Hughes and Roumain, "black America is a metaphor for the reinvention of the African self through a language that is the danced speech of its people."²⁰

Likewise, in the poetry of Hughes and Al-Fayturi, black America exists as a recurring motif and an extended metaphor reflecting the attitudes of the poets toward major issues such as racism and oppression. Further, Al-Fayturi and Hughes reconstruct the experience of Africans and African Americans through a poetics of anger, challenging all forms of oppression and exploitation inflicted upon black people in Africa, the United States and all over the world. In their attempts to confront the totalizing and hegemonic powers

consequences for African Americans. Using New York as a symbolic location of the black/white conflict in the New World, he addresses the city in a tone of lamentation:

Alas! New York
my veins are full of sorrows

been persecuted since they came to the New World; however, they are not able to be separated from America:

O New York
whatever you have done to them
and whatever they have done to you
their souls will run toward you
they will bury their faces
in your arms shedding their tears
on your breast
because you are a mother
and a killer of prophets
a forest of death.²³

Being aware of the catastrophic history of people of African origin living in the American diaspora, Al-Fayturi, in “The Incident,” denounces the lynching rituals integral to the slave era:

While the clowns were bursting into laughter
the corpse was dangling
like a windless flag
from the gallows
the sun is white-haired in the sky.²⁴

In *Aghani Efriqya (African Songs)*, Al-Fayturi condemns white racism, denouncing the experience of slavery in the American South:

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undergoes a radical change by the end of the 1920s. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes laments the end of the Harlem Renaissance and expresses his suffering during the Depression era: “The generous 1920s were over. And my twenties almost over. I had four-hundred dollars and a gold medal.”³⁰

Describing the racial situation in the United States during the Depression, Otey Scruggs points out:

Hatred of blacks and economic fears became more acute when more blacks began arriving in Northern cities as part of the movement by the first post-slavery generation out of the Southern fields. The growing antagonism in the North toward blacks did not, to be sure, take the form of disfranchisement and all-inclusive legal segregation but it did express itself in race riots and more rigid neighborhood separation.³¹

Embodying the spirit of the Depression era, Hughes in “Out of Work” deals with the problem of black unemployment. The African American speaker in the poem has walked the streets looking for a job until his shoes fall off his feet. The federal agency of the Depression years failed to find work for him because he has to stay in town for a year and a day in order to apply for work. Hughes’s speaker sarcastically replies:

A year and a day, Lawd,
in this big lonesome town!
a year and a day in this
great big lonesome town!
I might starve for a year but
that extra day would get me down.³²

The misery of black people in the United States during the 1930s, resulting from economic problems and the continuation of racist policies in the North, is also depicted in a poetic sequence called “Montage of a Dream Deferred.” The poem vividly portrays the frustrated dreams of the black people in Harlem and other urban ghettos in the North. Utilizing the montage technique, Hughes effectively portrays the wasteland/ghetto where blacks live, telescoping black life into one day and one

night. He uses a motion-picture technique juxtaposing diverse locations and disparate scenes of suffering in order to provide readers with a panoramic view of black life in America. The poem projects a miserable image of Harlem, different from the Harlem of the 1920s, with its busy nightlife and sparkling lights. Harlem, the home of black

In addition to the abandonment of the humanity of the black people, the United States has robbed them of their ancestral heritage, distorting the blues and transforming them into a white man's art:

You've taken my blues and gone—
you sing 'em on Broadway
and you mixed 'em up with symphonies
and you fixed 'em
so they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.³⁴

Like Hughes Al-Fayturi was interested in the African American musical heritage and folklore traditions. In a poem titled "To Paul Robeson, the Singer," Al-Fayturi reveals admiration for the African American singer who was brutalised by the American police apparatus for his revolutionary political beliefs. Depicting Robeson as a mythic hero and a victim of racist policies, Al-Fayturi explains the reasons for the campaign against him: "when you sing / they hide their daggers in their faces / and their hair grows grey / when you sing their grudge grows / and the city of New York feels humiliated and angry."³⁵ Using New York as a symbol of the growing racism against black people in the post World War Two era, Al-Fayturi addresses Robeson:

Your songs strip the city of its masks
of its perfumes and lipsticks
when you sing, the night of New York
hovers over the extending horizon
your songs are a witness
of the rebirth of the black people.³⁶

Dealing with the songs of Paul Robeson as testimonies of pain at a time of crisis, Al-Fayturi hails the way the singer transforms his songs into an instrument of struggle for freedom and equality. As a weapon of revolution challenging the oppressor, Robeson's songs participated in the awakening of black consciousness and ethnic

of their mothers / and play with the bones of their fathers.” Further, Al-Fayturi reminds Paul Robeson of the crimes committed against the black people of the United States: “The black child was killed / his blind grandmother was also killed / but the words she whispered into his ears every evening are still living.” Al-Fa

In the same poem, Al-Fayturi evokes the painful memories of a continent devastated by slavery and colonialism:

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As an African poet, dedicated to the struggle of the African people against hegemonic forces which seek to undermine their revolutionary potential, Al-Fayturi, like Hughes, gives priority to communal issues denouncing apartheid policies which aim to degrade his people. Being the first poet who speaks about Africa in Arabic, Al-Fayturi explores the pains and sorrows of the poor African masses, and therefore gains his reputation as the poet of the people. In “Sorrows of the Black City” Al-Fayturi reconstructs the history of his people, evoking painful memories of a colonial African past:

When the night sets up its trellis of wigs
on the city streets
and sprinkles its deep sorrow on them A

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my battered face.⁵³

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In an interview with Kimberly Benston, Amiri Baraka denounces slavery arguing that slavery is an evil everywhere but that in the United States there is slavery and racism:

Slavery is dehumanizing whether it is slavery practiced by blacks against blacks, by whites against whites, or whatever. The one added fact in the United States was racism, which did not exist with black versus black or white versus white slavery, a fact created by capitalism. The people who try to make African slavery some kind of paradise are out of their minds—slavery is slavery.⁵⁷

Echoing Baraka, Al-Fayturi refers to the heinous consequences of slavery and racism which pave the way for the exploitation of black people socially and economically:

Because my face is black
you stole my harvest
and left nothing except
my hate and grudge
because my face is black
you stripped me of my clothes and left me naked
in the cottage of darkness.⁵⁸

Regardless of his suffering from the consequences of slavery, Al-Fayturi looks forward to a better future based on mutual respect between the ex-slaves and the ex-masters:

Today I am not a slave anymore
so it is time you take off your
masks of arrogance
let us work together hand in hand
to build love and compassion between us
we are brothers
do not cultivate my land
with thorns and hatred
since I have put the seeds
of roses in my land.⁵⁹

To express the crux of his ideological perspective, Al-Fayturi attempts to sketch out an aesthetic whereby it is easy to see his own poetry in its proper context as an

expression both African and black. Being aware that his African culture has been violently shattered by slavery and colonisation, he revives significant episodes from African history, bringing into the foreground not only the glories of the African ancestors but also the sacrifices of contemporary African leaders. The process of bringing forward the African history of pain and suffering involves a revival of scenes not only of oppression and genocide but also of resistance and victory:

Africa is my land
profaned by the white man
Africa is my land
contaminated by the colonizer
I will die a martyr
for the sake of Africa
my children will sacrifice
their blood for the sake of Africa.⁶⁰

Denouncing the crippling impact of European occupation of African countries, the poet is willing to sacrifice his blood for the sake of Africa in order to liberate his homeland from colonisation.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon discusses the tragic consequences of colonisation on the psyche of the colonised:

Colonial domination is made possible by the negation of national reality, by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by the banishment of the native and their customs to outlying districts by colonial society, by expropriation, and by the systematic enslaving of men and women.⁶¹

turning my brothers into slaves,
walking in chains
the white man behind them
slashing their naked bodies with whips
white whips sticking to black skins and wounds
I am still hearing their cries
I am still seeing the bloody sweat
covering their foreheads
and the hostile white sun

colonised writer in Africa is not related to any inferiority or colour complex, but constitutes a step in the writer's development toward the revolutionary stage of his/her development. In *The Colonized and the Colonizer*, Memmi refers to the way in which the colonial subaltern, prior to his shift "on to the stage of revolt" passes through a phase of self-division and self-hate.⁶⁵ Therefore, in his revolutionary poetry, Al-Fayturi does not adopt the attitude of the ego-driven category of many postcolonial poets, but turns his attention away from the personal toward the social and collective. Struggling to express an authentic personality that confronts a hegemonic postcolonial world, Al-Fayturi prefers to advocate a revolutionary voice standing for the entire African community. He denounces colonisation, considering it as the major reason for African catastrophes and civilisational backwardness.

Therefore, in his poetry Al-Fayturi resists colonial hegemony denouncing the destructive impact of slavery and colonisation on the psyche of the African people. He makes Africa the locus of his poetry:

His destiny and existence are related to Africa. He thinks as an African and he breathes as an African making the African continent the center of his poetry. Therefore, the African spirit is manifested in all the titles of his poetic collections.⁶⁶

Thus Al-Fayturi calls for a poetics which explores spaces such as the trauma of slavery and colonisation that exists in African memory and still survives in African culture in the postcolonial era. This revival of memory would apparently free the African people from the complexes of the past and the cycles of race and remorse. On this basis, Al-Fayturi addresses his ancestors, the victims of colonisation and slavery:

O my ancestors
 history will bow in respect
 to Africa
 the rivers of light will flow
 into the new African dawn

removing the wall of darkness
O, my ancestors
can you hear the melodies
of victory?
the dark ages are falling down
the oppressor is fleeing
in fear and awe.⁶⁷

As a record of the turbulent African experience of slavery and colonization, Al-Fayturi's poetry provides a wide perspective on African history, illuminating areas of controversy about the relationship between Africa and the western world:

The white man has enslaved me
and occupied my land
he wants to keep me as a slave
at present and in the future
as he did in the past
he wants me to spend all my life
in a prison built
by my own hands.⁶⁸

Using his poetry as a mechanism to explore the ordeal of African people, Al-Fayturi denounces the brutalization of his people at the hands of the European colonisers and slave traders. He desc

When I get money
I will buy a boat and some dogs
I will sail to Africa to hunt
I will have a caravan of slaves.⁷⁵

The white slave trader is not only motivated by an interest in achieving material profit
but there are other motives:

crossing over the stone barriers
and great Africa is being born
Africa is twinkling in the rays
of the new dawn.⁸²

In “The African Flood” Al-Fayturi glorifies the sacrifice of the black people in Africa emphasizing their heroism during the era of oppression. Regardless of torture and pain, the African subaltern is able to challenge the European colonisers:

Even when Africa was still in chains
even when Africa was still a big prison
the land of the gallows and death
the African was dedicated to revolution
like his rebellious forefathers
he refused to be a slave
even when every inch of his skin
was enflamed by the whips
of the colonizer
he died only after tearing
the colonizer’s skull
into pieces.⁸³

Al-Fayturi also celebrates the liberation of black people from colonisation and slavery: “Millions of blacks woke up from their forgotten history / after ages of life in Diaspora.” He addresses black people all over the world, expressing his pride in the achievements of the black race in an era of liberation:

My brothers
the black man is transformed into a god
he is not a slave anymore
he is no longer the oppressed slave
licking the shoes of the white master
the stigma of slavery is removed.⁸⁴

Glorifying Africa, Al-Fayturi attempts to criticise a literature which seeks to abuse and denigrate the sacrifices of the African people during the era of slavery and colonisation. He also condemns the policy of systematic interpretative betrayal advocated by those who attempt to ignore the reality of the Africa experience of pain.

Further, he affirms the African spirit of protest and revolt against colonisers and invaders:

The land of Africa survives
through our blood
the land of Africa
echoes the cries
of my ancestors
I vow that the African wind
will disperse the ashes

experience of black people and engaging significant issues integral to the African diaspora.

Further, as voices of African descent, Al-Fayturi and Hughes struggle to capture the history of slavery and colonisation from the perspective of the oppressed and the humiliated, constructing a poetic mechanism capable of subverting hostile colonial narratives. Devoting their poetic talents to reshaping black history, Al-Fayturi and Hughes are engaged in a mutual dialogue dismantling racist discourses about Africa and black people. Considered as a reflection of the agonies born out of the painful black experience of slavery and colonisation, the poetry of Al-Fayturi and Hughes is a cry of anger against racism and colonisation. In their attempt to restore Africa as a remedy for the wounds of identity, and a refuge for those who are lost in exile and diaspora, the two poets confront narratives of distortion which aim to banish Africa outside human history. Approached as manifestation of the subtle interaction between revolution and the constructs of racism and slavery, the poetry of Al-Fayturi and Hughes attempts to draw attention to the catastrophic history of black people in Africa and the United States. Challenging racism and oppression by bringing to the foreground narratives of humiliation and violence against their people, the two poets aim to reconstruct history and rewrite the story of slavery and colonisation from the standpoint of the colonised.

Notes

All translations from Arabic prose and poetry are by the writer unless names of other translators are mentioned.

¹ Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality" in Padmini Mongia, ed., *Contemporary Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Oxford University Press,

Arabo-Islamic countries has no Jim Crow laws but undoubtedly it has its own traditions of prejudice and racism. From a historical perspective it is well-known that racial and colour prejudices are integral to Arabo-Islamic traditions. For example, prisoners of war who were captured in battles between the Muslim people and the invading armies during the early Islamic era were considv inaar