By the Rivers of Babylon: The Bondage Motif in the Performing Arts, Life and Aesthetics of Rastafarians

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Introduction

Rastafarians (popularly called Rastas) are members of a black Caribbean cult, professing black supremacy and fighting for human rights and justice. Today, there are Rastas in many different parts of the world. Rastafarianism itself adopts the cultural aesthetics and revolutionary dimension of Pan-Africanism. The name is based on the name of Ras Tafari, a great-grandson of King Saheka Selassie of Shoa, and the cult derives many of its characteristics from Ethiopianism. Ras Tafari was crowned Negus of Ethiopia in 1930 at a coronation attended by leaders and dignitaries from all over the world. The ceremony, in Rasta conception, was a fulfilment of a spiritual revelation by God through Marcus Garvey. The latter (on the eve of his departure from the Caribbean to the United States of America in 1916) had told his people to look to Africa where a black king would be crowned who would redeem the black race from the shackles of oppression. The prestige of the never-colonized Kingdom of Ethiopia, Ethiopia's historic defeat of Italy at the battle of Adowa (1896), and biblical references to Ethiopia as a great land,[1] are other reasons why Rastas imbibe Ethiopianism.

Forms of Bondage

Descendants of slaves and indentured labourers, Rastas found themselves on the lowest rung of the social strata in the Caribbean. They live under very harsh and traumatically impinging social conditions. The Caribbean islands, the main base of the Rastas, rank among the most poverty-stricken areas of the world, with a vast majority of the people living in slums and dismal settings. The bulk of Rastas in Jamaica, for instance, live in "wattle and daub" houses – houses built with sticks, covered with wattle, plastered with clay and then painted with lime. In most cases, the roofs are made with thatched palm leaves![2] Some other Rastas, according to Orlando Patterson, live in shacks:

> dreadful, nasty little structures – a cluster of cardboards, barrel sides, old cod-fish boxes, flattened tar drums and timber scraps. A few of the more luxurious consisted of carcasses of old cars.[3]

and, according to Katrin Norris:

> [Rastafarians] live in the utmost squalor in huts of boards, metal scraps, motor car parts, tyres, cardboard and anything they can lay their hands on.[4]

In fact, the wage differential in Jamaica has been described as probably the most alarming in the world, with skilled labourers earning as much as thirty times more than unskilled workers, and with the ratio of the "haves" to the "have-nots" being one to twenty.[5] Thus are the snarling fangs of capitalism wantonly displayed in the life of the average Caribbean Rasta: it is clear that he is under serious economic bondage. The socioeconomic situation is such that he finds himself pauperized, marginalized, and allowed only minimal resources.

Politically, the Rastaman is in chains. Dissatisfied and disgruntled, he is seen as a potential threat to bourgeois peace and stability. Like the "nigger" in rabidly racist Caucasian settings, every move of the Rasta is viewed with suspicion, even in the Caribbean where his race dominates in numerical strength. Thus baited, his pent-up anger and frustration often erupt into violence, resulting in killings and destruction of property. Clashes between Rastas and civil authorities are almost endemic, often leading to serious casualties on both sides. Madeline Kerr calls this internalized frustration of the Jamaican society an "intraggression".[6] No matter how hard he tries, the Rasta still finds the powers of the comprador bourgeoisie firmly established, and the rule of absentee cane farmers and merchants in Europe and America unshakeable in his Caribbean society. He lacks the economic base to effect a political change in a system that oppresses him.

Psychologically, it is not only the Rastaman but all black men in the diaspora that have to battle with the Jim Crow mentality of the oppressing "superior races". Incredible as it may sound, varieties of rabidly racist, 14th-century theories of humanity still abound. In most Western societies, the Negro is still seen as inferior mentally, socially and physically to the other races of the world! The psychological situation which brings about the defensive "rebel instinct" in Rastas is traceable to their unenviable historical background of slavery, and apparent perpetuations of it in lesser forms, as manifested in occasional whiffs of racism and oppression within their societies.

Prominent among racist theories of society are those of Arthur de Gobineau, Gustave Le Bon, Sir Richard Burton and Charles Darwin. While Gobineau and Le Bon ascribed such terrible qualities to the black race as incapacity to reason, inability to perceive analogies and differences, absence of critical judgement and an inability to control reflex impulses,[7] Sir Richard Burton, colonial governor of Martinique, asserted that:

> The safety of the whites demands that we keep the Negroes in the most profound ignorance. I have reached the stage of believing firmly that one must treat the Negroes as one treats a beast.[8]

He concludes that once a Negro has become adult:

> his mental development is arrested, and thenceforth he grows backwards instead of forwards.[9]

This view accords with that of A.B. Ellis, who even tried to give it a scientific basis! To him the "lower races"

> acquire knowledge with facility till they arrive at the age of puberty, when the physical nature masters the intellect, and frequently deadens it. This has been attributed by some physiologists to the early closing of the sutures of the nigger's cranium. They can imitate, but they cannot invent or even apply. They constantly fail to grasp and to generalize a notion.[10]

These obvious misconceptions form the bedrock of the megalomaniac, domineering and oppressive attitude of some white people in their relations with blacks, up till today. The Rastaman therefore has a lot to refute, a lot of misconceptions to correct, in order to salvage himself from the physical and psychological bonds which racial bigotry has heaped on him. It comes as no surprise then that Rastas in their art forms refute allegations of their inferiority, proclaim black supremacy and snipe at the imperfections in the social systems of the whites. Such efforts are attempts to rid themselves of the psychological bondage. In the words of the East African literary collosus Ngugi Wa Thiong'o:

> The Rastafari movement is one of the organizations helping the wretched of the earth to rise above the absurdity of their situation.[11]

Manifestation of Bondage in Rasta Arts and Aesthetics

Nowhere is the bondage motif more prevalent in Rastafarian art and aesthetics than in reggae music, the official music of Rastafarians. Rastas have through the medium of this music projected their plight to the world, aesthetically portraying the various forms of bondage bedevilling them. The Rastas in their choice of symbols are eclectic, often drawing on different bondage situations – the Egyptian bondage, the Babylonian, the modern-day Zionist and slavery situations.

Reggae music originated in Jamaica, but like the blues, its latent force, its moving spirit, its primordial inclination and sensibility towards it are hereditarily African. An offshoot of ska, a Jamaican dance music that is patterned after the American rhythm and blues, reggae, like ska, is highly reflective of the Jamaican society. In ska, themes and rhythms are often disorganized and random, to portray the prevalent socioeconomic disorder in Jamaican society. Rastafarians transpose this convention into reggae music with their weird, often appalling appearances and hairdos, and in the syntactic and semantic ambiguities and deviations in their diction, to show that they are in bondage. Like its precursors – ska and rocksteady – which were preoccupied with themes of social injustice and the condition of poor Jamaicans, reggae music serves as a podium for social commentary and protest, and a medium for conscientization. This explains the preponderance in it of themes of oppression,

bondage and injustice. Whether presented in physico-concrete terms or in psychological forms, the bondage motif has never been lacking in Reggae. We shall examine a few excerpts.

In one of Bob Marley's songs, entitled "Concrete Jungle", he portrays the oppressed (black) man's helplessness in the Caribbean. The song, sung in a soft, slow and mournful tone that is suggestive of the pathetic situation that is being described, asserts that the oppressed man is "bounded in captivity". Marley realized that though slavery has been abolished, the black man is still battling with vestiges of slavery in other forms. He is still in sociological and psychological bondage!

No chains around my feet
But I'm not free
I know I am bounded in captivity
And I know I'll be.[12]

In Marley's "Redemption Song" and "Buffalo Soldier", the Negro's position is that of a slave: the musical genius is engaged in historical recapitulation for the purpose of conscientization. There is a recapitulation of the history of slavery, in which the Negro was "robbed" and "sold" to merchant ships ("Redemption Song") or, more succinctly, "Stolen from Africa, brought to America" ("Buffalo Soldier").[13] In his "Crazy Baldhead" Marley projects the black man's bondage situation. He catalogues a number of atrocities perpetrated against the Negro ("I and I"):

I and I build the cabin
I and I plant the corn
Didn't my people before me
Slave for this country
Now you look me with a scorn
Then you eat up all my corn…[14]

The agricultural imagery of cultivation is emblematic of the exploitation of the human and economic resources of the Negro, and his marginalization within the capitalist economy which is sustained by the Negro's sweat. It is a statement on the traumatic economic bondage which the capitalist system subjects blacks to. Marley appears more virulent in his criticism of the capitalist system in his "Survival".

How can you be sitting there
Telling me
That you care, that you care
When every time I look around
The people suffer and they suffer
In everyway, in everywhere?[15]

In this simple but densely packed and emotionally presented opening, Marley portrays the atrocities of the capitalist system, the social dysfunctionality which inheres in it, and the

pathetic plight of the marginalized masses within its social framework. He lists the innate discrepancies in a class society, in couplets:

Some people got everything
Some people got nothing
Some people got hopes and dreams
Some people got ways and means

He then asks, rhetorically, how in such a marginalizing situation there could be survival for the poor black man:

Where is survival
The black survival?[16]

To Marley, the poor masses are in bondage and it will take a miracle to take them out of it, since the webs of capitalism are so closely woven to emasculate its victims. He resorts to biblical allusion to support this. Such a miracle will be:

Like Daniel out of the lion den
Like Shedrack, Meshack and Abednego
Burn in the fire, but they never get burnt.[17]

In Rasta philosophy, Babylon (in the light of the ancient Israelites' experience) is a place and symbol of oppression and bondage, an exile and another biblical Pharaonic Egypt. Zion, on the other hand, is home. The Rastas notice some similitudes between their situation in exile and that of the Jews in diaspora, especially in Babylon. So while Jamaica is Babylon, Africa is Zion in the Rasta linguistic register. Thus Marley in "Africa Unite" urges his people to unite, as a prerequisite for achieving progress. This progress is seen as a movement out of the Babylonian bondage:

Africa unite
Cause we're moving right out of Babylon
And we're grooving into our father's land.[18]

The same idea prevails in Marley's chart-buster "Exodus: Movement of Jah People". In this song, Marley advocates a movement out of the bondage of the capitalist system (Babylon) to Africa, using the Egyptian bondage motif as reference point. To break all the bonds and limitations that might hamper this movement, therefore, Marley calls for another biblical Moses to lead the blacks out of oppression:

Let's have another Brother Moses
One across the sea
Move.[19]

The idea of movement is suggestive of change, freedom, a release from bondage and oppression, an echo of the biblical plea "Let my people go" in revolutionary terms. The idea of "grooving" to the fatherland ("Africa Unite") is suggestive of enjoyment, relaxation and some kind of euphoria which Africans in diaspora hopefully expect to meet when they go back home to Africa. This, conceptually, is in diametrical opposition to their sufferings in exile. Although the idea may sound idealist or prove meretricious, it is nonetheless a kind of solace and hope to an oppressed people. In Marley's "Trench Town" the bondage motif is obvious:

> Up came a river to wash my dread
> Upon a rock I rest my head
> There I vision through the seas of oppression
> Don't make my life a prison.[20]

The literary qualities of this song are orchestrating, with the rhyme scheme adding to its musicality. The imagery in the metaphorical "seas of oppression" and life as "prison" adds more verisimilitude and concretization to what is being discussed. Marley then states the functionality and carthatic effect of reggae music – its use as a psychotherapeutic agent to liberate the body and soul from the bondage of social dysfunctionality:

> Lord, we free the people with music
> We free the people with music
> We free our people with music
> With music, oh music, oh music.[21]

In "Babylon" Marley makes a total renunciation and denunciation of the capitalist system, urging the oppressed man to break the shackles of oppression:

> We refuse to be
> What you wanted us to be
> We are what we are
> That's the way
> Its going to be.[22]

He calls the Babylon system a vampire that perpetually sucks the blood of the sufferers. He therefore advocates rebellion:

> We've been taken for granted
> Much too long
> Rebel, rebel.[23]

He also traces the genesis of the black man's suffering to the periods of slavery and colonialism:

> From the very day we left

To go out of our fatherland
We've been trampled on.[24]

In "Redemption Song" Marley sees the black man's bondage as mental and psychological. He therefore conscientizes him:

Emancipate yourself from mental slavery
None but ourselves can free our minds
Have no fear for atomic energy
Cause none of them can stop the time
How long shall they kill our prophets
While we stand aside and look....[25]

Marley recommends revolutionary violence by the mass of suffering people, to counter the reactionary violence of the oppressor, and to liberate the oppressed from the shackles of oppression. The same bellicose spirit is seen in "War", Marley's adaptation of a speech delivered by the great Emperor Haile Sellasie I on 28 February 1968 at a gathering in California. According to Marley in the song, until racism and oppression are obliterated from the world, there will always be war. He describes the sociopolitical situation in places like Angola, Mozambique and South Africa as "sub-human bondage" which must be destroyed if there is to be peace in the world.[26]

Other Rasta Artists

Peter Tosh

Besides Marley, another very good projector of the bondage motif is his fellow Jamaican Reggae musician, Peter Mackintosh (Peter Tosh). Much of Tosh's music portrays the black man in sub-human bondage, criticizes western life-styles and espouses rebellion as a way out of the shackles of oppression. Tosh, like Marley, was always revelling in crisis when he was alive. Often on the wrong side of the law for his professions and convictions, Tosh's revolutionary stance is further emphasized by his alliance with tough radical Rasta sects and the scaringly vituperative rhetoric in his music.

Tosh's chart-buster "Equal Rights" was conceived against a background of the cheating and oppression of blacks by whites. He therefore calls for equal rights and justice at all costs:

I don't want no peace
I need
Equal rights and justice ...[27]

In his "Downpresser Man" Tosh conceptualizes the oppressor in concrete, physical terms. "Downpresser man" in Rasta language is a synonym for the oppressor: a man who presses others down, a subjugator, a suppressor, one who puts his fellow men in bondage. Tosh predicts a time when oppressed men will unite to revolt, throw off their shackles, and in a peculiar feat of revolutionary violence, hunt the oppressor, the downpresser man. There will be no means of escape for the oppressor then. Even nature will sympathize with the oppressed

men and frown on the oppressor. The situation is both dramatic and picturesquely orchestrated:

Downpresser man,
Where U wanna run to?
You gonna run to the sea
But the sea will be boiling
When you run to the sea.
You gonna run to the rocks
The rocks will be melting
When you run to the rocks
I say downpresserman
Where you wanna run to?[28]

In a dramatic turn of events, therefore, the captives are free and the slave master becomes the captive. He now has to beg to be spared the wrath of the intractable avengers. He resorts to bribery to save his neck, but to no avail, "'cause the downpressed 'nigger' ain't no sucker no more!":

You can't bribe no-one
Dem no want no money
The runners money
That money gets funny…[29]

Breaking the bonds of oppression is his ultimate goal now!

Eddy Grant

Another reggae musician in whose work the bondage motif recurs is Eddy Grant, a highly prolific reggae artist with an orgiastic love for Africa. One of his songs in which this motif is well orchestrated is "War Party" from the album *Killer on the Rampage*. In a very solemn and painfully pathetic tone, Grant vividly describes the relationship between black and white people in the Caribbean – the deceit of the oppressor who pretends that he loves the oppressed men, inviting them to "parties", only to exploit, use and then discard them.

Such a "party" is emblematic of the false alliances, facaded traps and solidarity moves with which the oppressor baits his victims. It is what Grant regards as a War Party. He therefore declines an invitation to such alliances, where he would be caged. Moreover, he has heard and seen the outcome of such meetings in the past between the oppressor and the oppressed:

You invite me to a war party
Me no wanna go
Everybody seems to be inviting me to
A war party, me no wanna go
Heard about the last one
So thanks, but no thank you.[30]

Grant goes on to outline all the heinous crimes perpetrated against the Hamitic races by the Caucasian races, the enslavement of the Negro races, their pogrom-like elimination and the fact that the situation is still prevalent:

> You killed off all the Indians
> And you killed off all the slaves
> But not quite
> So you killed off the remains.[31]

The situation becomes a game of hide and seek, the oppressor hunting his victim and the victim hiding, reminiscent of the Egyptian bondage motif – how Pharaoh sought and killed all the male children of the Israelites who were then in his bondage:

> You a look for me, and I'm looking for you
> I can't believe what they say about you is true
> That you're a bastard just like Pharaoh
> You killed the children just like Pharaoh
> Now you sent a ticket for me
> It don't have RSVP
> Oh lord it's a war party.[32]

The oppressor has given him no chance to reply, so as not to turn the invitation down ("It don't have RSVP"), but the oppressed man is wiser now, having learnt from experience:

> Heard about the last one
> So thanks, but no, thank you.[33]

Obviously, the black man is still in chains as he is daily tricked into false alliances with the oppressor. The result? Disaster:

> You've invited all our wise men
> Many times before
> To dance around your fires
> And even out your scores
> And when the toll's taken
> Of the valiant and the brave
> The only decoration
> Is the one upon the graves.[34]

The Theme of Bondage in Other Art Forms

Some Rastas are fine artists and carvers. Even in the works of these artists, oppression and the fact that the black man is in bondage are manifest. Carvings, drawing, and paintings of weird, sad or weeping personalities are common in Rastafarian aesthetics.

Dreadlocks and rough (natty) appearances are used by Rastas as a sign that they are still in bondage, besides being symbols of their defiance of the existing sociopolitical order.

Nigerian Rastas are usually unanimous about keeping their dreadlocks. Some of them were interviewed by this researcher. When asked when they will do away with their dreadlocks, they all said not until the black man is no longer in chains![35]

The use of marijuana by Rastas is another effect of their bondage, especially in their native Jamaica. Marijuana, which Rastas regard as a holy herb and an effective cure for such ailments as asthma, bronchitis and other cold symptoms, is in actual fact a kind of opium, used to suppress the sorrowful feelings engendered by the dismal Babylon system; the bondage underneath which the Jamaican Rastas operate. This is attested to by Professor Leon Barrett. In his scholarly work, *The Rastafarians of Marijuana*, he writes:

> Its use produces psycho-spiritual effects and has socio-religious functions, especially for people under stress. It produces visions, heightens unity and communal feelings, dispels gloom and fear and brings tranquility to the mind of the dispossessed.[36]

And in corroboration of this view, a fifty-year old Rasta elder declares:

> If Ganja was not available in Jamaica as a sedative to keep poor people calm, the island would have experienced anarchy already.[37]

In his "Easy Skanking" Bob Marley states the importance of marijuana as a suppressant of sorrowful feelings caused by the oppressive realities innate in his society:

> Excuse me while I light my spliff
> Good God, I gotta take a lift
> From reality I just can't drift
> That's why I'm staying with this riff.[38]

Generally, use of marijuana, alcohol and other drugs is an index marker of societies where oppression reigns supreme, where certain members of society are in bondage. Besides the Caribbean, South Africa during the apartheid years is another good example. Rastas also use marijuana in order to protest against their oppression within the "Babylon System" which bans its use. Professor Barrett asserts that:

> As a protest against society, ganja smoking was the first instrument of protest engaged in by the Rastafarian movement to show its freedom from the laws of Babylon.[39]

In language, Rastas have developed a speech and language culture out of the conventional English language. It is in fact a deliberate bastardization of the language of the oppressor, as a mark of protest against him; a psychological means of feeling free from bondage. Rastafarian bastardization of language involves the changing of the orthodox meaning of words to their opposites, for example, the adjective "natty" which in conventional English means "neat, smart or daintily tidy" is normally used in Rasta register to describe a dirty-looking

dreadlocked Rasta! The bastardization also takes the form of the breaking of basic linguistic rules, qualitative deviations from the rules of the English language and a deliberate creation of incoherence and syntactic and semantic ambiguities in language to portray the contradictions and frustrations that are inherent in the oppressive Babylon system.

Edward Brathwate, using Shakespeare's Prospero and Caliban (from *The Tempest*) as symbols, regards the kinds of language scheme engaged in by the Rastas and some other black artists in the Caribbean as "Calibanization" and traces its origin to the eras of slavery and colonialism. He asserts that the Calibanization of the language of the enslavers is the first and most fundamental form of cultural resistance undertaken by the slaves during the era of slavery.[40]

George Lamming, too, identifies language as playing a historic role as a major colonizing agent. Using the relationship between Prospero and Caliban as a symbol of that between the colonizer (the oppressor) and the colonized (the oppressed), he advocates a rejection of the language of the colonizer, before the colonized individual could be totally free from bondage. This is because, according to Lamming, an adoption of a foreign language engenders a kind of spiritual exile from the colonized man's native inheritance.[41]

Conclusion

Rastafarians are obviously pushed towards defiance by the prevalent sociopolitical realities under which they operate. They definitely have their virtues. Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica, once referred to them as "beautiful and remarkable people".[42] Professor Barrett, too, admits that the Rastafarian movement has a philosophy and structure that is capable of providing a rallying point for the masses in search of social change, and that it has "evolved into a dynamic, creative instrument for social change".[43]

What the Rastas agitate for is simple: justice, not judgment; fair, if not equal opportunity with others to make their lives; and freedom to live their lives the way they want, in a world that is devoid of oppression and bondage. They have projected these convictions to the world through their arts, beliefs and ways of life, and the whole world now knows about the bondage under which Negroes operate in Jamaica and other parts of the world. They are, in the words of Shakespeare, men "more sinned against than sinning".[44]

A reversal of the situation will definitely see the Rastas harnessing and diverting all their efforts towards constructive, patriotic and not necessarily confrontational activities in society. Until the prevalent anomalies are rectified, the theme of bondage and reactions to bondage will continue traumatically to dominate Rasta arts, life and aesthetics.

Notes

1. See, for example, Psalm 68 verse 31.
2. Barrett, 1977:8–11.
3. Patterson, 1965:23.
4. Norris, 1962:36.
5. Barrett, 1977:12.

6. Kerr, 1961:21.
7. Biddis, 1970:134–144; Mezu, 1973:86–88.
8. Sir Richard Burton, the Colonial Governor of Martinique, as quoted in James, 1984:17
9. Ibid.
10. Ellis, 1890:9.
11. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, 1972:86.
12. "Concrete Jungle", Marley, 1985.
13. "Redemption Song", Marley, 1980; "Buffalo Soldier", Marley, 1983a.
14. "Crazy Baldhead", Marley, 1983b.
15. "Survival", Marley, 1980.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. "Africa Unite", Marley, 1980.
19. "Exodus", Marley, 1983.
20. "Trench Town", Marley, 1983a.
21. Ibid.
22. "Babylon", Marley, 1980.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. "Redemption Song", Marley, 1980.
26. "War", Marley, 1983b.
27. "Equal Rights", Tosh, 1977.
28. "Downpressorman", Tosh, 1977.
29. Ibid.
30. "War Party", Grant, 1982.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. The present researcher interviewed ten Natty Dread Rastafarians on the issue of dreadlocks.
36. Barrett, 1977:129.
37. Ibid. p. 130.
38. "Easy Skanking", Marley, 1978.
39. Barrett, 1979:129.
40. Brathwate, 1970.
41. Paquet, 1982:1–15.
42. Barrett, 1977:xi.
43. Ibid.
44. Act IV, scene 2.

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