

GOSPEL SHIP AND GOSPEL TRAIN AS IMAGES OF ESCAPE IN BLACK SPIRITUALS

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Abstract:

Blacks who were taken as slaves to America in slave ships created songs in the new land. These were sorrow songs that were popularly called as Black Spirituals. Since Blacks did not know the new language, English, they relied on images to communicate their feelings in the form of what was often decried as crude and non-standard English. But their songs withstood the test of time because of the strong emotional appeal and the native genius that the blacks possessed. Blacks employed many images in their spirituals; however, this paper studies the ship and train imagery that were used by the blacks to express their desire to escape slavery, torture, sin, and even this world. The Mayflower ship that transported them to America remained in the collective psyche of the blacks. This, combined with the ship stories that they had learned from the Bible, was put to good use by the blacks to create imagery for escaping slavery. The blacks also associated the chariot from the bible with the trains that they had seen in their environment and used it in their songs to talk of being transported to a land of freedom. A close reading of these songs reveals that, the spirituals, though termed as sorrow songs had hope in built in them.

Keywords: *Sorrow songs, ship and train imagery, black spirituals, emotional appeal.*

African Americans produced different genres of music such as folk songs, work songs, Negro spirituals, gospels, blues, jazz etc. Such songs helped slaves articulate their feelings to the world. Among these, the black spirituals are of great importance. Spirituals started as folk songs, in fact, of all the folk songs, the largest collection is that of spirituals. Spirituals usually imparted Christian values and at the same time talked of the hardships the blacks endured under slavery. The term “Black Spirituals” is synonymous with other terms like Negro Spirituals, African-American spirituals, Jubilee songs and African-American folk songs. These songs, generally, served two purposes. They helped express the faith and devotion of the blacks and at the same time communicated their longing for freedom from slavery and bondage.

Spirituals were usually emotional renditions. Songs like “I’ve been ’buked and I’ve been scorned,” “Now ain’t them hard trials,” “I’m troubled in mind” and the like, as the titles go, talked of sorrow and agony. At the same time, there were innumerable songs that talked of an approaching freedom and promised that better days were ahead. Songs like “Free at Last, Free at Last,” “Ain’t Going to Tarry Here,” “Children, We All Shall Be Free” are joyful songs. But even in such songs, the sorrow and pain caused due to slavery is noticeable. Thus, black spirituals largely had sorrow and grief superseding joy and hope.

African Americans were good at creating images. Much of the songs they sang were decorated with images taken from different sources. The African American slaves drew a lot of images from the Bible as well as from their daily lives. The desire to escape slavery, social injustices, lynching and even this world (to go to a new world) were much talked about in their spirituals. They employed images to communicate their desire to escape. They were displaced from Africa by force and they sought to move from slave states in America and also from this world altogether to a better land. The knack of conveying messages by combining their past with their present is appreciable in the case of African Americans. Black slaves

endured a dreadful middle passage during which they were taken aboard on a ship from Africa to America. This was a journey often reminisced with pain. It was horrific, unpleasant, agonizing and even fatal. Toyin Falola, a noted Nigerian Historian and professor of African Studies give details of the horrors of this middle passage, commonly referred to as the Atlantic slave trade in “Encyclopedia of the Middle Passage.” She says,

The experience of the Middle Passage varied greatly, but in most cases it was characterized by cramped unsanitary conditions, with little food and water, few opportunities for exercise, frequent sexual assaults, suicides... (xxi)

Falola also goes on to say that out of the millions of Africans who endured the Middle Passage, many did not stay alive to reach the shores of America. Many died out of dehydration, diseases, abuse, lack of food and the like. Many even committed suicide. All deceased bodies were thrown overboard. It was not just dead bodies that were thrown overboard. Many slaves were drowned by the captors themselves. This was done to teach a lesson to other slaves who might plot rebellion during the passage. Falola states, “When the captive seemed so sick that they might not survive, they might be hurled into the sea.” (145)

When slaves, who survived this passage, reached the shores of a new land, they carried with them painful memories. The image of a ship displacing them from their native homeland to an alien foreign land remained in the collective psyche of the Blacks. Over the years, this image of a ship that displaced them was converted to a ship that helps them escape. Songs such as “The Old Ship of Zion”, “A Ship like Mine”, “My Ship Is on The Ocean” talk of a gospel ship that is waiting to take them to a new land. For instance the song “The old ship of Zion” says

What ship is that you're listed upon?
'Tis the old ship of Zion
And who is the captain of the ship you're on?
My Saviour is the captain (The Old Ship 102).

Their slave ship that displaced them from Africa is replaced by this gospel ship that would take them to heaven. The displacement by the slave ship is now replaced by the escape using the gospel ship. The journey in the slave ship was agonizing. The slaves didn't want to go aboard neither did they have a smooth sail. Blacks were piled up like goods in a single deck with no space to move or sleep freely. The deck usually a low, dark room in the ship reeked with the smell of human sweat. It was too hot to be tolerated and highly unhygienic. But now the Blacks have another ship in which the journey is smooth. This is a ship in which all Blacks are asked to go on board. They are not fettered and pulled forcefully into it. They instead, joyfully go on board to take a memorable journey. This is a ship that would take them to their new homeland, i.e., heaven. The slaves ship removed them from their homeland, the gospel ship, on the other hand took them to their new homeland.

The slave ship also brought death. Going aboard this ship meant death at any time. It brought pain. But the gospel ship comes after death. It helped escape pain. When Blacks boarded the ships of their White traders, it meant they had become slave. They were no longer free. But boarding the gospel ship meant they are no longer slaves, but free. The middle passage across the Atlantic sea is often seen as a journey through the sea of despair. It was a long journey that lasted anywhere between 1 to 6 months. But the Gospel ship would not make such delays. It was a quick transportation to heaven. Arriving in the new land (America), Blacks were taken to auction blocks to be sold. Husbands were separated from wives, children from parents and kinsmen from their own tribesmen. But the Gospel ship that they sang of would take them to a land where there would be a great reunion. It was not a land of separation but a land where families would reunite. It was a land in which there would be no slavery, therefore a land of freedom. In heaven, they saw unity and equality.

In addition to the slave ship, they also had the Ark of Noah in the Bible. Noah built an ark (similar to a ship) to escape the judgment of God. God said to Noah,

The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch (*KJV* Gen. 5:13, 14).

In this ark, there was room for all. Going aboard this ark meant being saved from the flood. It meant escaping destruction. The Gospel ship could be interpreted in terms of Biblical parlance and at the same time referred to the real ship that would be waiting for the blacks to escape from the plantation states of America and reach Northern states. Thus, the Black song writers were able to combine both the Biblical ark as well as their real life ship into one to serve both the purpose of seeking as escape for the soul as well as their person.

Similar to the Gospel ship, the enslaved Blacks also sang about the Gospel Train. Blacks saw trains only in America. They did not have trains in their native land. The train as a locomotive was quite fascinating for the slaves. Dorothy Scarborough and et al. reason out that "Its rhythmic turn of wheels inspires a rhythmic turn of phrase in a folk song. Its regularly recurring noises are iambic or trochaic like Negro's patting of foot or clapping of hand..."(238) Trains were also seen as vehicles of hope. Trains usually carried hundreds of people to distant lands. The enslaved blacks envisioned a distant land where they would have freedom. Moreover, for blacks, Underground Railroad was available as a beacon light of hope. Ann Heinrichs in the book "The Underground Railroad" clarifies that "The underground railroad was not a real railroad. It didn't have train cabs, tracks, or a schedule, yet thousands of people travelled to freedom on this train." (7) It was a network created by already escaped black slaves, Northern abolitionists, philanthropists, church leaders etc. to help other enslaved blacks to escape to Canada and other free states in North America.

Blacks used the terms associated with railroad to plot their escapes and also successfully complete it. It was called underground because slaves escaped at night (in the dark) so as to avoid being noticed by White masters. Many code words were used to help them escape. People who led the escaping journey were called "conductors". People who hid slaves and gave them food and other provisions were called "agents". Houses used for hiding were called stations. The runaway slaves were referred to as passengers and the like. With such code words, slaves could sing,

When the train comes,
When the train comes along,
I'll meet you at the station (When the Train 94).

Blacks were forced to work not only in the cotton fields but also on the railways. It had many advantages. It was less monotonous and less laborious. Working for the railroad also gave him a suggestive distance, a feeling of an immediate way of escape (Dorothy Scarborough, 247).

Trains also created a temptation for the blacks to travel and an opportunity to find a job. Train was also seen as a spiritual symbol. African-Americans were essentially religious in nature and their imagination was easily caught by the thought of eternity. As the trains travelled into distant lands, they had their thoughts also run into eternity, to a distant land which was yet unseen. At the secular level, railroad terminologies had a different meaning, but at the spiritual level they were given a new meaning. The following song is a good example:

The train is a-coming, oh, yes!
Train is a-coming, oh, yes!
Train is a-coming; train is a-coming,
Train is a-coming, oh, yes!
King Jesus is conductor, oh, yes!
King Jesus is conductor, oh, yes!
King Jesus is conductor, King Jesus is conductor

King Jesus is conductor, oh, yes! (The train is a-coming 253).

Other songs such as “De Gospel Train Am Leabin;” “Every Time I Feel the Spirit”, “Oh Be Ready When the Train Comes In” present the varied spiritual beliefs of the Blacks. These songs invite sinners to repent and board the train to go to heaven. They also talk of the coming judgment. The arrival of the train meant judgment is near. They also sang of a “funeral train”. The sound of the train meant death has approached. This, in a way, meant escape for the Blacks. They sang,

The funeral train is coming, I know it's going to slack, For the passengers all are saying and the train is creped in black. Yes, when I get up to heaven with God, I'm going to remain where death can never enter, and there won't be funeral train (The Funeral Train 262).

On the whole, the train songs, though not much in collection, convey important messages and meet both terrestrial and spiritual needs of the blacks. It is common for blacks to create songs with the trains and their music often imitated the rhythmic movement and noise of the train. On analyzing black vernacular spirituals, it is clear that the train imagery has stemmed from the image of the chariot that is referred to in the Bible. Just as the Blacks were able to correlate between Noah's ark, their slave ship and the gospel ship, so were they able to strike a relationship between Ezekiel's chariot wheels and the wheels of a train. So when they sang of gospel trains, they interspersed ideas associated with the chariots in the Bibles. Like travelling along in a train to freedom, they called for fellow black slaves to get into the chariot and travel along to heaven. They sang,

Oh my good Lord, O my good Lord
O show me the way, show me the way
My good Lord
Enter the chariot travel along
Enter the chariot travel along (Oh my good Lord 74).

This chariot imagery, like the other images of transportation, is used to talk of an escape to a better home, a home where one belongs. This image has been used to invite slaves to escape to a free land and also to invite sinners to escape judgment. The following invitation to a sinner illustrates this point:

O Sinner man you better pray
Going home in the chariot in the morning
For judgment is coming everyday
Going home in the chariot in the morning (O Sinner Man 139).

Another chariot song that is quiet popular among the blacks is “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” It is a song which not only celebrates the hope of going to heaven or escaping to heaven but also signals a plan or general aspiration to be carried to freedom by the underground railroad system (Gates & McKay 13). This song seems to have been inspired from the Biblical passage of II Kings, chapter 2 where the prophet Elijah is taken up into heaven in a chariot. The song talks of crossing river Jordon which is often seen as a Metaphor for going to heaven.

I looked over Jordon and what did I see?
Comin' for to carry me home.
A band of angels comin' after me,
Comin' for to carry me home (I Looked Over Jordan 79).

In the Bible, Elijah the prophet crosses the river Jordan after which a chariot comes to carry him to heaven. The arrival of the chariot signals that time has come to leave this world. None could stop Elijah, even his favourite disciple Elisha. All throughout his journey, his disciples try to stop him but Elijah keeps moving. He crosses Jordan and the chariot of fiery horses descends and separates Elijah from Elisha and carries Elijah away. Thus, the image of the chariot signaled that the time has come to escape. It also implies that there is no more hindrance for them. None can prevent them from escaping. Alan Coulson and Jess Harris observe,

Chariot means the railcars in which the slaves would ride. Home means a free country- a haven for slaves, Jordan... means the River Ohio- crossing over meant going to a free state, A band of Angels means the people who helped the slaves to escape (28).

The Chariot image thus meets few needs. It called for slaves to escape to free states; It called for sinners to escape judgment and it also invited the people of God to leave this world and escape to heaven which is referred to as the real home.

On the whole, a study of the use of the ship and the train imagery in black spirituals gives a good understanding of how the black slaves managed to make meaning out of a not so encouraging world and garnered hope for future. One understands that instead of buckling under the pressure of slavery, the slaves, by their imagination, created images of hope that made life livable for them. Through their religious songs, they have tried to meet their spiritual as well as physical desires of escaping. These songs had been songs that had given hope and strength to carry on. Spirituals themselves had given temporary escapes from their daily toils. Singing these songs were a welcome break from daily repetitive activities. The black vernacular spirituals have been used as an able vehicle that carried the aspirations of the blacks to escape the clutches of slavery, misery, misfortune and even sin.

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