

Slam Poetry- A link between black feminism and oral poetry traditions

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Abstract

Slam poetry is a recently emerged genre in the West that has gained critical and popular attention during the last three decades. Today, universities and poetry groups across the world have slam poetry competitions. Africa and African black population has a rich tradition, especially in oral poetry though it was shunned away as a less evolved and less sophisticated genre by modern literary circles. When slam poetry, a performance oriented oral poetry gathers momentum, it is worthwhile investigating, how this new style of poetry, that is far different to canonical forms, connects the contemporary literature back to oral poetry tradition among Blacks. The project investigates and establishes such connections of slam poetry to oral poetry. Black females were the doubly oppressed minorities whose voices were strangled in throats by the colonial patriarchal society for ages since they were not given the freedom to speak out their minds first because they were women and they were Blacks. Yet, they found spaces for the ideas in performance poetry through others who spoke for them and the poets they inspired and later through genres like slam they are successful in voicing the centuries old sufferings of Black women. The Black poets who got international critical attention were mostly from America and it was only towards twentieth century that we have Africans writing about Africa. The project probes the published Black women's literature and how much justice they could give and compares it with the slam poetry of young Black women. Books, journals, YouTube videos and lectures are used as material for the paper.

Keywords: poetry, slam, oral poetry, Black women, Africa, African culture

Introduction

“There are at least two reasons why the situation of poetry matters to the entire intellectual community. The first involves the role of language in a free society. Poetry is the art of using words charged with their utmost meaning. A society whose intellectual leaders lose the skill to shape, appreciate, and understand the power of language will become the slaves of those who retain it--be they politicians, preachers, copywriters, or newscasters.” (p.97)

These are the words of Dana Gioia from her essay “Can Poetry Matter” published in *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1991. Throughout her essay, she expresses her disappointment on how poetry has vanished from its prestigious position in literature. As a solution to the diminishing importance of poetry, she makes six solutions among which two of them can be quoted “Poetry teachers especially at the high school and undergraduate level should spend less time on analysis and more on performance.” (p.104). Both of these solutions point us in the importance of performance oriented poetry. This vacuum is filled by slam poetry today.

Slam poetry is a genre often frowned upon but sometimes welcomed with open arms. Love it, hate it, now with three decades, slam poetry has reached a state where it is impossible to ignore it. There are many canonical and prominent litterateurs who reject slam poetry outright. However, it is a fact that when the number of are reducing year after year, when reading is not a hobby of many, poetry in published books and journals is losing its popular audience. In 2017, we had Bob Dylan, a singer receives the Nobel Prize for Literature which once more a reinforced the fact that poetry has moved from the page to stage. But, thinking beyond the canonical intellectual realms, it is thought to provoke whether slam poetry is a movement contrary to traditions but a way back to the traditions which might be more inclusive and redeeming. Here lies the politics of slam poetry and its scope when it comes to Black feminist literature.

The Spoken Poetry- New or Revived?

Poetry is the oldest forms of literature whose time frame of inception cannot be absolutely determined yet its earliest examples can be found in ancient Greek literature (Klarer, 1999, p.27). However, we have to consider the fact that this definition restricts to the Western canon and the history of written language. But artistic and aesthetic expressions using language may have existed even before that. For example, the branch of hermeneutics, used for the interpretation of oracles “aiming at diverse interpretanda like oracles, dreams, myths, philosophical and poetical works” (Mazavintos, 2016, p.1) clearly showing that that poetry, lyrics, allegories, rhymes and rhymes predates other literary genres which may not require a written language. An example would be the Vedas and Upanishads, the sacred texts for the followers of Hindu religion which were by hearted generation after generation in India. The Composers and performers of oral poetry in the west like bards (who sang epics in England) and troubadours (who sang lyrics and elegies in France and Italy) similarly used the medium of spoken word for poetry than publishing it.

When we include the dimension of spoken poetry, we cannot overlook the fact that not many were privileged to knowledge and literacy in ancient times, even today. Nomadic communities, slaves, outcasts, women and other genders who were considered inferior were seldom allowed the right to education. Since, poetry had the advantage that it could be memorised easily, thanks to allegories and rhymes, poetry may have been a part of popular culture. Poetry was there in hymns, prayers, lullabies, protests, slogans, satiric verses sometimes accompanied with music. Poetry- supposed to

be the oldest form of literature, a form that pre-existed even written languages is a genre of inimitable importance when it comes to voicing the unheard subalterns of every civilisation.

Be it Black literature in Africa and America, Dalit¹ literature in India or feminist literature, poetry has always been a part of literary articulations of the suppressed- and it sang the song of those whom the society never knew existed on the fringes of the society. The Padayani style of poetry, brought into the mainstream of Malayalam literature in Kerala, India by Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan was performance oriented and it required a number of performers to perform a poem in the traditional Padayani style². As a part of modernism in Malayalam literature, Padayani came forward to the mainstream and gained immense popularity.

A movement similar to this that surprisingly occurred at the same period was the reggae style of Bob Marley which included music, performance, and dance, deliberate use of the language and diction of the minorities that contained the spirit of Jamaica. Like slam poetry, these forms required the active participation of the audience, unlike an attentive disciplined audience we find in reading sessions of poems. It is not implied that Marc Smith when he began the tradition of slam poetry in Chicago, he was repackaging a tradition than innovating a new style. Slamming definitely is like a nouveau vague to poetry which has evolved imbibing the voices and styles of the subaltern over three decades. That is why when it comes to the popularity of slam poems, poems of Black women are far ahead than the rest (Somers-Willet, 2009). It bridges between the old traditions which the poets themselves might not be aware. Poetry slam gives a space for the performance of literature which was a dimension we lost when literature became exclusively what is written, typed, published and read.

¹ Dalits is a name collectively given to all jatis (groups of people divided according to sacred law) that comes under the lowest rung of Indian varna system which was once rigorously practised in India. Even today, the prejudice exists though it is legally banned. Dalits were permitted to do menial works and were often not allowed to get educated. As a result, their lives were in misery for centuries and since 1947 the Government is taking measures for the upliftment of the community. Dalit literature was the literary works written by Dalits about their lives and it became a huge revelation to Indian readers that Dalits lived amongst them in such deplorable conditions.

² A folk ritual art including music, dance and poetry popular in Pathanamthitta district in Kerala, India.

Author as a construct that restricts poetry

With the invention of printing press, publishing became mechanised and easier. A number of copies, identical to the original could be produced and sold making better financial gains. It was a monumental step that led to the spread of literacy and increased the availability of literature. The copies produced were identical, authentic and accurate. Thus, the hobby of reading moved from libraries to houses. Bookshelves and libraries in a house show a sign of intellectual prowess of the family. From Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) to movies of the 1990s, we have scenes which show a family member reading a book to the family or a mother reading bedtime stories to children. It shows how reading in private was made possible and how popular it was.

But along with this, there came a slight disadvantage. There was no room for improvisation or adding to an original tale. Here occurs the division that Barthes terms as the 'work' and 'text'. The difference between an author and reader became more pronounced (Barthes, 1967). The reader gets dehumanised as a mere object passively receiving the work with only controlled and curated option like reviews to react to it. For example, when a Shakespearean play is staged in Pamplona and London, following the exact same script, the play would be still different. While if a movie is made on the script is telecasted in both the cities, there cannot be changes and elements of the particular city made on it. This is a problem when it comes to identical exact reproduction. The growth and room to expand for a literary work stop with the publication. Reader/spectator lacks an agency and gets removed from the work. Even the system of reviews cannot, which rose with the closet reading system cannot successfully represent the reactions and creative spirits of a passive reader.

The poems we know though we do not know the poet

In the Victorian English literature, we find Mary Ann Evans who chose to write under a nom de plume of a male, George Eliot. The Bronte sisters also used male pseudonyms. But had this the case in the 19th century, there might be a lot of women writers who could not write because they were women and they did not have the financial opportunities, like the fictional character Judy Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf (1929). But their voices may have been there in the creative writings before them. Their voices might not be identified as that of a

female but they might have been performed and accepted by someone else in a society where performance rather than the celebration of the author was accepted.

This can be a hindrance when it comes to poetry that is meant to be recited or lyrics which were sung. The age-old tradition of poetry recitation evenings in the 18th and the 19th century North India can be taken as an example. Professional writers, courtesans and other nobles would gather in the evenings all set for a poetry recital. When a Shayari (two lines stanza) is recited the poet pauses at the right instance and waits for the audience's response. If the audience likes the recited portion they might encourage the author with 'wah' or 'arey waah'. After a stanza is completed, a listener may add recite another Shayari. It might be a poem prepared earlier by oneself, or by some other poet, or it might be a spontaneous recitation. This was a system practised when the tawaaif (courtesan) culture was at its peak. The poems recited in the evening were later published according to the records preserved but it was not often written by a single author. By the time, publishing became popular, tawaaifs lost their respect in the society and were degraded into prostitutes and hence not many tawaaifs wanted to continue their profession or accept that they belonged to this tradition. Hence, seldom do we find names of tawaaifs in the records of Shayari performances. Another example is that of bhajans³ sung by the Bhakti⁴ saints like Mira and Kabir. These poets and musicians lived in the fifteenth century and little is known about them. The only clue about the author is a phrase at the end of the poem like 'kah Kabir'. But we have poems and songs credited to these authors which have references to motor cars and trains. This shows that these poems were augmented by another who came later. Who these poets were and who adapted the original versions is difficult to find out. In devotional poetry there is a possibility that there might have been a female poet since women were permitted the freedom to worship and pray in groups even in highly restrictive societies.

³ Bhajans are Hindu devotional or spiritual songs. They were written in vernacular and were comprehensive for laypeople. There are centuries old bhajans whose authors are unknown

⁴ Bhakthi movement is a religious reform movement that originated by different religious reformers from various states of India. Alwars, Kabir, Mira are all major Bhakthi saints. The Bhakthi saints tried to make religion more approachable for people and pointed out the corruption among the clergy with their religious works

Another style of poems which has its versions in almost all civilisations is the Bard poetry. In Bard poetry too, we do not necessarily know the author. The writer sings praises of some hero who is revered among the people and tells the tales of his achievements through the poems. The anonymity of the poet gives an advantage of adding one's creative bits into the poem without revealing their identity. But in places where a pedagogical education of history is not practiced, the role of teaching history comes to rituals and families. Stories of heroes who saved the clans become bedtime tales. Poems recited about them become lullabies. Here it would be the mother who teaches the story to the child since nurturing was associated with women in ancient societies all over the world.

When it comes to Bard poetry, the South African Xhosa tradition of Imbongi cannot be forgotten. Imbongi was considered as mere praise poetry by historians like Kropf and Achie Mafeje who initially studied this tradition. Imbongi were bards who were given an elevated status in Xhosa clan. They performed spontaneous oral poetry which was addressed to the whole clan. It was not a system of genetic lottery or popular vote but more like an art that can be performed only by the talented and those who had immense interest for the vocation (Opland 1983). They too might have been influenced by women since they were nurtured by their mothers. Opland says there might be references to female Imbongis though there are not enough documents to support it. By the 20th century, there were female Imbongis like Jessica Mbangeni and Nontsizi Mqgwetho according to *The Nations Bounty* by Opland (2007).

Poetry in its initial stages have been associated with oracles and among African tribes, oracles were occasionally women. Religious festivals like the New Yam festivals and the Osun festival were associated both with a season, celebration and a moment to respect and remember the elders. In the Osun festival, they celebrated the ancestors who sacrificed their lives to protect the tribe. "During such festivals, there are poetic compositions that reflect the myths behind the deification of the human beings. The deity worshipped here was the river goddess and the rituals were led by a virgin lady Arugba, singled out as the most prominent and revered dramatis personae. She renders uttering that is poetic and in the form of prayer and warnings.... The Oracle is a divine force, but it assumes poetic force in the manner of articulation and rendition of divine blessing,

warnings and prophecies.” (Oguni’ijmi &Na’Allah, 2005). Here too the poetry is spontaneous and free from any social restrictions of power like Imbongis.

A few lines of the performance of Ifa oracle shows the depth in the poetry and stylistic of the oral poetry of African tribes. Though Ifa oracles were usually men, the worries of women about children, the maternal feelings can be traced in these lines, which points us to the fact that, they were influenced heavily by women.

Ko ponmi Ilawusere fun mi wa
 Oun lo d’Ifa fun Obarakosi
 L’oko ti n lo Ogun koyekoye
 Mo ni Ifa
 Too ba ti ja maa ji mi
 Ifa wa ni to ba se buu t’imi iun ni
 Isu kii p’eyin ko gbagba ongo
 Agbado kii pon’mo kko kbagbe irukere
 Oju merindinlogun l’Oniyemuye ni
 Gbogbowon ni fii mu mi
 Orunmilla, Agbonmiregun fun mi loye temi
 Oye la ki n rina
 Oye la.”

The translation of the poem is
 “Alara is the owner of wisdom
 Alakotun is the owner of advice
 Oba Orangun of Ila is the owner of water Ilawusere
 If I can get a person going to orangun in Ila
 I would have given him the gourd of yeere
 To fetch for me the water of Ilawusere
 He makes a divination for Obarakosi
 On the day he was going to the battle of memor drain
 I say Ifa
 Wake me up soon as you wake

Ifa says if it for his own child
 The germinating yam does not forget the bud
 The maize does not carry its without tassel
 The Oniyemuye plants has sixteen openings
 All are used for drinking water
 Orunmila Agbornmirengun,, give me my own intellect and let me see clearly
 Cloud disappear and let me see clearly
 Cloud disappear (Oguni'ijmi &Na'Allah, 2005, pp 137,138).

The poem contains worries about children and woes about men who went to warfare. Household farming maize and yam are used as imageries. Drinking water comes in frequently in the lyrics. These are household issues which were handled by women. There is no praise for great acts and victories in wars or stories of bloodlust. Instead, there is a plea for intellectual clarity like a woman who is torn by emotions especially when she stays home taking care of kids and worried about her husband. And the war is already 'forgotten' according to the poem- may be because there were too many clashes. But the losses a family endure, a widow, an orphan and a mother endure cannot easily be forgotten. The prayer for wisdom maybe a plea to power that could end the wars and make peace though it is not obvious.

In performance poetry and oral poetry, women had a role to play sometimes on the stage and sometimes behind the curtains. The credit for performance was not often given to them yet, their contributions survived pointing to a tradition where a woman's creative works were appreciated for generations even when they did not have the freedom to express. This happened in Africa and Asia before colonisation and modernisation occurred. Hence, oral poets and oral poetry performers had a contribution of femininity in them long before women were banned in universities because there was a preconceived false notion that women were not capable of reasonable and logical thinking.

The slam poetry how it makes a unique statement

The need to narrate, the need to create and express through creativity is a need for existence. In the book of Genesis, God tells Moses about himself "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). Harold Bloom mentioned in the culminating lecture at Yale University in April 2014 that he translated the

sentence from Hebrew and said the sentence meant “I will be because I was” and “I am because I act”. Descartes said in *Discourse in Method* (1637) that “I think therefore I am.” To define oneself, to create an individual and unique stream of thought, one should know his/her actions, and the past. And when the past is mutilated and removed from beyond reach, one way to recreate and make peace with the past is by connecting to them by learning about them, bringing out the past element dormant in one’s genes into actions and thereby recreating the history through traditions and rituals. Writing is an attempt of self-validation, an attempt to be remembered and revered when it came to the author centric writing where women had little space. But in oral poetry what mattered was the statement made and voices echoed- Imbongis are an example here. So to reach back and unravel the identity of the black feminine, we have to go back to the lost history of poetry.

For a comparison, a few lines from the slam poem recited by Emi Mahmoud in the Individual World Poetry Slam 2015 finals, in Washington D.C. can be compared.

So I am walkin’ down th’ streets
 When a man come n’ see me n’ says
 “Ey yo sister, yo from th’ Motherland?”
 Because my shade’s too dark to have come from foreign soil
 Because this garment on my head screams ‘Africa!’
 Because my body is a beacon asking everyone to come flock to the Motherland
 I said, “Ya I am Sudanese why?”
 “because you got some flavour in you
 Wonder what yo mama gav’ you?”

Mahmoud makes that disappointed expression on her face just like how she reacted to the question. She almost enacts the flirting then and there on the stage and the snide racist attitude of the man who approached her. Next, she proceeds to tell about her mother and her motherland.

My mama is a woman flawless and formidable in the same step
 Who walks into a war zone and has warriors cowering at her feet
 My mama...
 My mama carries every one of us in her face, in her body and her blood
 And blood is of no use if loose and she holds us close.

When I was seven, my mama cradled bullets in billows of her robes (...)
 And when her son was held at gun point by soldiers and asked her who she was
 She told them,
 “I,
 Am a woman
 I am a daughter of Adam and who the hell are you?”
 And the last time,
 And the last time we went home we saw our village burn
 Soldiers pouring blood from civilians
 As if they took water and turn’d into wine
 And the woman who raised me turn’d and said-
 “Don’t be scared
 I’m your mother
 I’m here
 I won’t let them through.”

My mama gave me Conviction
 Women like her Cradle countries between their shoulder blades
 And her Tired Eyes Bruised Wrists and the Titanium plated spine
 And the widow wearing amputees. (...)

These people who date quote Rumi but have no idea what he sacrificed for word
 The kind who fawns over to Lupita but have their racial filters on
 The kind who take,s takes politics with latte and I take mine with tear gases
 Every guy I meet, every guy I meet
 Wants my introduction to the dark side
 Wants me to open up this obscene skin n’ le’them read ev’ry tearful page
 ‘Coz what survivor has had’nt struggle made Spectacle.

Don’t talk about the Motherland
 Unless you know Being African waking up an afterthought in this country.

Don't talk about my, flavour, unless you know that
 My flavour is insurrection, it is rebellion, it is mutiny,
 It is burden, it is grit, it is compromise and
 You don't know compromise- I tell you, rebuild your home for the third time
 Without bricks, without mortar, without any other option,
 I turn'd to that man and said,
 "My mother and I
 Don't walk the streets at home anymore
 Because, we don't have streets at home.
 Anymore."

There is anger and an outburst of rage in the poem that cannot be compressed into a page no matter how hard one tries. The performer makes it complete alone with the recital. Her voice breaks at times while speaking about her mother, her eyes well up with tears as she almost screams. The voice modulation is vital for the poem. It is not all enactment but the release of pressure and a strong signature made by her. The audience applauds her at every pause of her poem. There is an element of discovery of the self-happening in the poem. She speaks may be about an incident that she faced, but she speaks for her country and many young women like her. She lets out her rage on being judged on the basis of skin colour and the subtle racism that irritates her. She rejects the sympathy and rejects the sympathy on the sufferings of third world countries. The performer speaks through her mother about the mothers that survive the wars and endure the circumstances. Further, she bluntly points out the political plight of her nation and it is left like a raw wound. She mocks the powerful sympathisers like a modern Imbongi. She does not change her accent and make it sound like that of Black American English. The performer makes complaints and bares open the reality on their face like an Ifa. She praises her mother and countless other mothers from her land who live with courage and dignity. She uses slam poetry like African tribes used centuries ago though it may be unintentional.

Phillis Wheatley was the first published African-American poet, who was captured and sold as a slave at the age of seven and since then she has lived the life of a black woman separated from her roots. She was educated by her liberal masters who later emancipated her. She was an ardent Christian that can be traced in her poems too (O'Neale, 1986). Wheatley learnt English literature

and canonical English works and wrote poems following the same. Her poem on George Washington, written in 1775, (whom she addresses with the devotion of a pilgrim to King or God 'his excellency) is as follows:

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
 Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.
 While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
 She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
 See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
 And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
 See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
 Involved in sorrows and the veil of night!

The Goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
 Olive and laurel binds Her golden hair:
 Wherever shines this native of the skies,
 Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise.

Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.
 Thee, first in peace and honors—we demand
 The grace and glory of thy martial band.
 Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,
 Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!

One century scarce perform'd its destined round,
 When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
 And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
 The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
 Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,
 For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
 Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
 While round increase the rising hills of dead.
 Ah! Cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
 Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
 Thy ev'ry action let the Goddess guide.
 A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
 With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! Be thine.

It is a lyric written in the traditional Miltonic style- by invoking to a golden haired Goddess, her muse and she personifies Columbia as a woman too. But this is an ideal European woman with

fair colour and golden hair ash she repeats in her poems. Wheatley is worried about the brutal and sinister rule of Britain and praises Washington, a knight sent by God to release them from chains. She is oblivious to the chains that carried her from Africa to America in the first place. Wheatley was against slavery but had little awareness about its brutality since her masters considered her a human being and brought her up like an American child (Walker, 1983). Deep down she knows she can never be the golden-haired angel and it is the great kindness of her masters to save her from her home country and let her learn.

Though Phyllis Wheatley speaks about cruelty towards Columbia but she turns a blind eye towards the cruelty the Black population face. She is aware of the circumstances but her subconscious is far removed from them- because she uses a medium by and for a white dominated population and because she might have heard tales about abuse of slaves but experienced little of that. She would have been grateful to her masters, who could have abused her but did not do that. This devotion and subservience are present even when she voices against slavery. Wheatley responds with a less passionate voice of a third person who knows the truth but does not know it for sure. There is no outrage or acceptance of the fact but just a mild hope in God that slavery might end- not as a right, but as a boon.

But how presumptuous shall we hope to find
 Divine acceptance with the Almighty mind
 While yet o deed ungenerous they disgrace
 And hold in bondage Afric: blameless race
 Let virtue reign and then accord our prayers
 Be victory ours and generous freedom theirs (1778).

Though she was emancipated, her life later was not easy since work was scarce for free Blacks and her inability to survive on her own despite being an accomplished poet shows that, her poems did little to help her discover herself.

It is not just Phillis Wheatley, but this lack of spirit is a common trait even is who were treated in the slave narratives. The slave narratives are real life experiences by slaves who were mistreated and who witnessed mistreatment. But the ones who could write the ordeal they faced and get it published had to undergo the scrutiny of a capitalist society. The slaves were the educated in the

European and American tradition. They could not let an outrage loose using an opportunity provided to them by benevolent masters and they knew it was not an opportunity given to everyone. The first slave narrative of its kind would be *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oluadah Equiano or Gustavos Vassa, the African* written in 1789. The narrative is partly an autobiography and partly a narrative dictated to someone else, which makes it less authentic. The work presents the Igbo tribe Vassa belonged to as a civilised and organised community, unlike the European perspective. Vassa was captured and traded as a slave and witnessed the horrors of slavery first hand yet, his autobiography fails to capture them. It is more about his conversion to Protestantism and strength of faith that helps him not to react but survive and forgive. “The narrative is a fascinating reconstruction of a fascinating reconstruction of the hybrid subjectivity of a slave writing in a language, not of his own expressing through the genre of Protestant spiritual autobiography.” (Kitson 2008)

Another major celebrated Black poet whose works are considered phenomenal is Lucy Terry. Lucy Terry, like Phillis Wheatley, was just a girl when she was traded as a slave and brought to America. She lived a slave until she was married. Only one poem of hers, *Bar Fights* was published and it was orally preserved until 1855. The poem is a patronising work on how two white families were ambushed and murdered by Native Americans. The poem does have a stylistic quality that suggests it might not have been the only poem of Terry. But only one poem that agreed with the popular sensibility of the age could make it to recorded and published literature.

Later Black women in Zimbabwe found solace in singing psalms in the church, with a stylistic dance and clap with it, performing the prayer in their own way (Davis, 1999). Blues and Jazz which brought forth many eminent Black female voices created an independent space of their own through music and performance. They learnt the same music as the white musicians but the ability to perform in a community brought space for innovation and creativity which brought them closer to their instincts, the songs they heard back in their motherland, the songs they sang while toiling in the farms and that gained an immense popularity that stayed for ages. Sections of the slam poem by Natasha T Miller ‘Us Black Women’ can be worthy of quoting to compare. Miller, a feminist and an LGBTQ activist performed her poem on April 22, 2012, at Michigan State University.

Us, Black Women
 Like samples out of grocery stores
 Set out to be picked out
 And never fully paid for,
 Us.
 Black women.
 Like vaginas that still smell
 Like unwanted babies, blood and four hundred years of forced entries(...)
 Ludacris makes a reckon about Oprah
 And a room full'o 'upstanding Black men' say
 "Hail, we donnoe what happened in that car." (...)
 And you 'may be she doesn't like her people.'
 May be you have forgotten your roots.
 Do you think we exist only here
 I haven't seen
 You leave a penny at a gas station
 You can imagine the pain of raising a Black Panther
 Only to have your sons call you
 "You bitches and whores on the Radi-O
 You ar' not a thing as you call
 Your jaw could not walk a day in mouth of Sissly Davidson. (...)
 There are no holidays dedicated to us
 Just a bunch of poems used to undress everything but our minds.

The poem is an outrage against an incident about Black women (even popular celebrities) being mistreated and disrespected by men (both Black and White) and how the society turns a blind eye to an issue of such gravity. The way Black women are objectified like samples in a shop and treated similarly throws light into the racist attitude which has not been despite having laws in United States of America against racism. Miller connects to the violence a Black woman endures today with that of the sexual exploitation Black women once suffered as slaves. She cannot fathom how the Black Americans consider Africans as other people and have forgotten their roots so easily.

She brings out the pain of the Black women who once lived in shadows and terror of being separated from their kids, abused by the owners and the husbands and how the identity of Black still exists as a shame. She runs out of breath while pouring out words from her heart. Miller used the accent of African American English used by rappers and hip-hop singers. She reminds us the history and tells that its trauma is far from over. Miller points out her fingers and confronts the audience and engages them on a journey from the past to the present.

This oral and visual feel cannot be captured completely and authentically by a listener and writer but a viewer who watches the performance of T. Miller would get the feel thanks to the rhetorical techniques and spontaneous and brilliant articulation of the poet. Though she mentions the sexual abuse of slaves just once, it is powerful enough to quiver and engage us. The poems written Black American slave women like Phillis Wheatley can only give us a glimpse and evoke the sympathy of a third person reminiscing at it not the shock Miller's poem evoked. Towards the end, Miller elucidates how the poems failed to encapsulate the horror Black women faced once and how the aftermath is still endured everyday like it is an ordinary incident not worthy of attention. This power, T Miller gets is because she goes back to a primal form of expression- oral poetry that slumbered in her genes. It is also because of heart penetrating effect of the visual dimension that speaks better and leaves less room for error than letters.

It is true the situation has changed from that of Phillis Wheatley. In her voice, she reflects ages of sexual and human rights violation that Black women experienced and how all this culminated in the present state where racist and sexist ideas are subtle but prevalent. She might not have witnessed or lived the experiences of slaves who were captured like cattle, transported to an alien land and forced to live a life of brainwashing, conversion and subservience. Educated by American White Christians, she would have been trained to be subservient and hate everything African in her. She acknowledges (though unintentionally) the White supremacy and years for it though she knows she can never achieve it. She criticises slave trade and abuse of slaves but it impossible for her to be ungrateful for bringing her from the darkness of her tribal life to education and Christianity. Chinua Achebe makes it explicit that once a Negro is educated, he becomes an outcast- he would belong neither among his people nor among the whites. After years it seems not much has changed. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Aunt Ifeoma's friend Obiora who did his studies in

Cambridge says ““All my years in Cambridge, I was a monkey who had developed the ability to reason.”” (Adichie 2004).

Imperial domination required a new language to describe the world it had created and the people it had subjugated. Not surprisingly, this new language did not celebrate these subject peoples nor toast them as heroes. Rather, it painted them in the most lurid colours. Africa, being European imperialism’s prime target, with hardly a square foot escaping the fate of imperial occupation, naturally received the full measure of this adverse definition (Achebe 2009).

Hence, the use of the new medium and its tools of expressing creativity hinder honest expression when a person of different ethnicity uses it. It results in an identity crisis and a lack of self-discovery which was possible when they used their traditional artistic forms. But when they are removed from their traditional artistic forms and not familiar with them, they mix what they know of their traditional style, with the culture they learnt to create a novel mode of expression. Slam poetry is one of such modes of creative expression.

There would have existed women like Natasha Miller, Maya Angelou and Zora Neale Hurston back during the centuries when slavery was illegal but prevalent. But their voices were not heard because of a single dimensional cultural circle that refused to widen their gaze beyond anything but what was accepted as modern. But there were voices of Black women voicing their protests and hope of freedom in published works since the 19th century. An example for such female voices is shown in William Blake’s poem ‘The Little Black Boy’ from his anthology *Songs on Innocence and Experience* (1794).

In the poem, it is a mother who knows the suffering a Black slave undergoes, consoles her son regarding the extreme situation, and instills faith in him about a better tomorrow. Though it is a Romantic white writer, the character he chooses is that of a Black female slave highlighting the mother son relationship. This would have been based on a real-life situation since slave trade was prevalent in 19th century Britain. The boy desires for acceptance and camaraderie of the whites and there is an obvious admiration to the whites. However, the poem has the dream of equality and brotherhood that Martin Luther King spoke about ages after in his speech *I Have A Dream* (1963). The woman is consoling her son, and this might have been a situation Blake witnessed in real life. Either way, in the poem, we have a Black woman, who was then considered an object, speaking

her mind. Other examples of Blake voicing the experiences of Black slave women and slavery are that of Oothoon and his opposition to slavery and double standards against Blacks.

Blake elaborates the psychology of the colonialist Throtormon's mental imprisonment as well as on his oppression of both woman and African person of Oothoon, a victim of colonial and sexual violence. Oothoon is raped by the slave driver Bromion to impregnate her and increase her market value. Certainly, Bromion boast encapsulates the slaver's desire for total ownership of the slave with physical and sexual domination symbolised by branding his name into their flesh.

One significant matter to notice is that, it took a long time for an African brown and living in Africa to publish their works. Though there were African Americans who wrote in English and African writers who were brought to other colonies who wrote in the respective languages, there was less volume of works published by Africans about Africa. A few exceptions are Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Franz Fanon, Chimamanda Adichie yet compared to the number of novels and memoirs of colonisers about Africa the real-life experiences are not many and the works written by Africans are even less. The reasons are again the inaccessibility to the print medium, acceptance among readership and critics and less flexibility with the written literature that too in a foreign tongue. As a part of returning to the roots, Thiong'o has vowed to write in his mother tongue Gikuyu language. Many others are using oral poetry like slam poetry, rap, Reggae and blues to revive tradition that almost died yet reoccurs and persists in the rapid changing modern modes.

Conclusion

"O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties."- said Maria W Stewart at Franklin Hall, Mississippi in 1831. She was one of the first African-American women, a lecturer, a feminist and an abolitionist. She speaks with confidence against the illogical and prejudiced mindset that oppressed women, Blacks and Black women. She spoke to an audience of both men and women, mostly a conservative society about the need to open up and being liberal ideas in order to usher the changes and arrive in a modern world. Her words are a powerful rhetoric and her delivery of speech was poetic and prophetic in quality. This power and conviction could literally pave the way to the first wave feminism. This was an age when there were women who delivered speeches publicly yet refused to sign them with their names, instead chose to write 'By

a coloured lady' so that the readers would approach it without prejudice and issues regarding security for it was not a time when slavery was not anymore in the minds of people.

But the fiery speeches by the firebrand feminists were not written in newspapers and discussed in cafes- they were spoken to the masses and among community meetings. It was available for the illiterate and the scholars. It was spoken in the black accent to the black and white population with conviction ringing in their voice. The speeches ranged on a variety of subjects from constitutional reforms and religious policies to migration policies and human right- but it was the spoken word that made the effect.

Slam poetry performances of black women have gained popularity much more than any other group according to Susan B.A. Somers-Willet (2009). Language is implicit for humanity and willful and deliberate use of language is a unique ability of human kind. Language is a means of communication not just to one another but also to oneself. Language and poetry, however, come more of a communal activity when it is performed in front of an audience. Poetry becomes all inclusive when it is recited together by a group led by the author and thus dissolving the author-reader barrier. This is how author speaks poetry and rhetoric devices to convey what words fail to do.

Slam poetry is not just a return to tradition. Slam poetry is another emergence of oral poetry which has been lurking around coming up every now and then in rhetoric, oracles, hermeneutics, ballads and now in the modern era they came in the form of reggae, rap and slam poetry. Slam poetry has so far gone closer to the traditional African roots than any others genres like jazz or reggae could. Slam poetry is gaining popularity in African countries and in Asian countries and women seems to have a hold over it unlike the performance poetry traditions earlier. This is because, in spite of ages passed, what women had to speak about the past, its trauma while living as a minority post colonial female is not fully expressed in the written medium. Options to speak in a room gives a sense of liberation and being listened to gives a rise to sorority and a recognition dawns that the problem is not that of one person.

Let poetry slams reach the African feminine and all those who were not listened and those who could not even approach a publishing house due to various shortcomings which were not their faults. Let slam poetry revive the oral poetry traditions which were chopped off from their roots

give them a sense of unity with the culture of their ancestors and establish a sense of belonging and help in revealing the self better than any other media. As a part of returning to the roots, Thiong'o has vowed to write in his mother tongue Gikuyu language. Many others are using oral poetry like slam poetry, rap, Reggae and blues to revive the tradition that almost died yet reoccurs and persists in the rapid changing modern modes. This is an age where reading is a boring hobby, the modes of reading are changing and entertainment much more sophisticated can inject persuasive politics easily. Let the oral poetry traditions revived through slam poetry slam the doors and make creative and critical thinking possible.

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