

# Rita Dove's Poetry: A Quest for Identity and Protest Against White-Culture Dominion

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## Abstract:

Rita Dove has achieved the international acclaim through her poetry though she has emerged from the narrow confines of Afro American literature. Her poetry exemplifies the widely acclaimed idea of "Art for Art's sake" and takes pleasure by reinforcing her black identity in her writings. She being very much popular in the literary world of America had never put aside her black identity. The concept and quest for identity in her treatises is clearly visible on the basis of her approach towards the black history that provides her writings a uniqueness and adorns it's creativity. She has enriched the periphery of culture and history with accurate information and spontaneity. She through her poetry wants to make the world aware about the black literature and their traumatic existence in the culture of America. She vividly portrays the conditions of black slaves in America. The slaves are being treated very pathetically and their voices are always being curbed in order to rule them. America which considers itself a democratic nation had created a history by inflicting wounds to the black people. Dove, through her creativity has dug out the graves of torture and agony of the black people and portrayed that pain in her poetry.

**Keywords :International, Reinforcing, Creativity, Spontaneity, Black literature , Wounds.**

The term identity can be referred as a distinctive characteristics possessed by individuals or shared by members of a particular social group. It is obvious that human beings are essentially social in nature and belongs to one or more than one social categories. The formation and development of an identity naturally becomes a necessary part of one's life. Right from the birth a person gets its identification based on the names given to the individual by his / her parents in order to provide him an identity. It is true that identity of a person helps the other people to locate the person in a social situation, in order to differentiate himself / herself

from other members of the same society. The blacks in the realms of America want to main their identity but were always marginalized and victimized. Their voices being curbed and had to suffer the ending tortures of pain and agony. Rita being herself a black women in America was in serch to provide any identity to the people of black community by highlighting their sufferings and tabulations. She has realistically portrayed the life of black slaves and their miseries in America. Her poetry is full of pain in which the slaves being humans had to suffer the terrors and horrors both physically and mentally. Dove through her poetry gave voice to the slaves whose voices were unheard and they had to suffer the tortures without any sigh. Her poetry is a medicine to the wounds of black people and the witness of the sentiments and feelings of the black slaves. She highlights the pain of history experienced by the blacks both physically and mentally in the American culture. The inflicted wounds still torment them and are imprinted in the minds of the blacks.

Born in 1952 in the city of Akron, Dove was fond of reading and writing from her childhood and has a strong bond with the literature of the world. She became the first African American poet to receive Fulbright Scholarship to study in Germany. She started writing poetry during her childhood but came to the eyes of world when she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her poetic creation and creativity. she is a connoisseur of art, literature and music and holds her Masters Degree in Fine Arts from the University of Iowa. As an erudite scholar fond of travelling, she has great interest in history and the cultural diversity across the world. she has immortalized the adroit use of the visual and auditory imagery with the help of the technique of Negative capability, which is the characteristic of Keats and Robert Frost.

Dove appeared in the literary canons during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. Her grip on words and her creative power had not only made her the star in the literature but also highlighted the trauma of being a Black in the American society. Dove is the witness of BAM (Black Arts Movement) and had captured the pathetic movements of Black people in order to potray them vividly in the literary treatises. Gates and McKay in their treatise entitled *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* state that, ‘The Black Arts Movement tended to transform the manner in which black people in the United States of America were defined and treated’ (18). The history of slavery and the unending wounds to the black community has rendered the black community into lifeless figures than human beings. The political segregation, biased justice and scenes of torture, pain, terror and humiliation made the blacks feel

marginalized and hopeless. The Blacks had to face the pangs of being Black and discrimination everywhere in the American Society. As Arnold states in the paper *The Poems of Rita Dove* that, “Dove sees poetry, its dignity, nature and functions, in a way, quite different from most of the writers who came just before her”(53).

In Dove’s poems, there is justification of terrible experiences of slavery and its aftermath incidents. Her mission was to make the people aware about the condition of Black people in America. As Roland Barthes aptly writes in the treatise entitled *Historical Discourse. An Introduction To Structuralism* that, “Historical discourse is essentially a product of ideology, or rather imagination if we accept the view that is via the language of imagination that responsibility for an utterance passes from a purely linguistic entity to a psychological or ideological one” (253). Dove through her poetic creativity wants to emancipate the condition of Black people by highlighting their past in order to build their present. The trauma of slavery finds an important link in the quest for identity and strengthen the bond and thread of unity among Blacks in the alien culture of America. Her poetry focuses the pain of blacks and a shameful reminder for the White people who are responsible for the tortures to the Black people. The injustice done by the White people is a blot in the history of America that cant be erased in the pages of literature and the minds of the Black people. Her poetry is a historical treatise that has chronologically expressed with pain the tortures and the tabulations faced by the Black people in America. As M. KalaiNathiyal and V. Malarkodi aptly states in the book *Cultural Amalgamation of Cosmopolitanism in Ritathat*, ‘Dove is indebted to the local culture and its tradition, yet seeks for an overreaching Universalism that informs these localities, different as they may be. What ultimately counts for Dove is her retrieval of a united humanity” (29).

Dove’s poetic anthology entitled *The Yellow House on the Corner* focuses on famous historical figures and the condition of the slaves. Poems entitled “Belinda’s Petition,” “The Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi,” and “Kentucky” etc. highlights the inhuman adversities and hardships faced by the African Americans. Her poetry not only reflects the mere exposition of the master-slave relationship but also portrays the behavior of the White master over his Black slave. The poem entitled “Belinda’s Petition” deals with the aspect of slavery in which a slave files a petition for freedom and is a real incident happened in America. Belinda, an African Women has been kidnapped by some persons and has been sold in Boston to a white man as a slave. Belinda being very brave could not be able to bear the tortures of her master. She in her protest

filed a petition in the court in order to free herself by expressing the pain and trauma of being a slave. She was not only physically tortured but also her mental stability was at the verge of deterioration. She pleads with pain and says:

I am Belinda, as African,  
 Since the age of twelve a Slave.  
 I will not take too much of your Time,  
 But to plead and place my pitiable Life  
 Unto the Fathers of this Nation. (3-7)

Belinda very sympathetically pleads with the govt. of America for her freedom from slavery. She would not protest against the government but has been working as a slave at the age of twelve in the web of pain and suffering. I am black and could not protest against my master but I have the heart to plead before the government in order to achieve the flights like a bird. My feathers are cut and I could not fly. Dove capitalizes the important words like “Country”, “Slave”, “Time”, “Life”, and “Nation” in order to satirize the government of America which considers itself democratic and founded their base on American Dream. America being very powerful has recently won its autonomy from Britain might have their velour at heights and must provide justice in order to free us from the cages of White People. Dove writes:

“Lately your countrymen have severed  
 the Binds of Tyranny. I would hope  
 you would consider the Same for me”

The pleading of Belinda is not only the voice of her but the voice of all slaves who are under the inhuman clutches of White People. This is a direct satire on the government of America who have inflicted the wounds on the slave community. In order to create an impression of sentiments she calls then as the Fathers of Nation. Dove has thrown the arrow direct into the hearts of American people who consider themselves as human. The way of pleading by Belinda and the pathetic expression brings tears in eyes. She has truly pictured the life of slaves whose wings has been chained and their voices have been muted.

“The Transport of Slaves from Maryland to Mississippi” is another tragic people penned by Dove in order to highlight the drastic condition of the Black slaves in America. The poem also had a historical touch mingled

with pain and agony. The poem starts with the introductory note which states, “On August 22,1839, a wagonload of slaves broke their chains, killed two white men, and would have escaped, had not a slave women helped the Negro driver mount his horse and ride for help”. The persona answers that,

The skin cross his cheekbones  
 Burst open like baked yam-  
 Deliberate, the eyelids came apart-  
 His eyes were my eyes in a yellower face.

The lines have a pathetic touch and arouse the feeling of sympathy and empathy to the readers by discussing the tortures and sufferings experienced by the black slaves in the so called democratic country of America. The courage, braveness and endurance her ids narrated from the different angle in order to satirize the people who blindly believes the supremacy of White community. Dove in one of her interview with Rubin narrates in that, “I found historical events fascinating for looking underneath –not for what we always see or what’s always said about a historical event, but for the things that can’t be related in a dry, historical sense”(229). In the poem entitled *The House Slave*, Dove has given vent to the feelings of a slave who was working in a plantation field. The imagery of the people clearly portrays the hardships and trauma faced by the slaves in the canons of American. Dove narrates, “At the second horn, the whip curls across the backs of the laggards---” (Dove 8-9). This inhuman and brutal attitude by the masters clearly reveals the conditions and life of a slave in America. A slave being a human being is treated by his master as a brute and punishes him by the whip. The narration by Dove clearly reveals that the Blacks have suffered a lot and was living with the hope that one day the cheque given by Abraham Lincoln might be cashed and the Blacks will be able to see the fruit of freedom. Jap PreetKaur rightly observes in this context when she says in the book titled *Reaching Centrestage: Cultural Identity in African- American Theatre* that, “Slavery for African-Americans is not an experience that can be confined to the past, placed in time, which they can, once and for all, come to terms with and then go on with their lives. It is something that starts all over again whenever oppression is experienced, remembered or forgotten.”(44).

Dove is a multi-linguist and has a proper grip on German language also. She has embellished her poetry with the varied images and literary devices in order to highlight the condition of slaves in the alien culture of

America. She through her poetic variations has bestowed the immortality to the brutal attitudes in order to show that world the real face of the American Dream and the wounds inflicted upon the slaves by the American culture. She never feels ashamed on calling herself black but feels proud to highlight the unheard cries of Black people in the Annals of History.. Her poetry has the tendency to end the tyrannical rule of Whites over Blacks. There are lots of poems penned by her that witness the trauma and pain of being a black in the society where respect is only for white standards. Thus, the present paper makes an attempt to explore the conditions of Black people with a profound sense of history bringing to the forefront, the neglected, hidden and silenced voices of the African Americans. Her poems probe the individual lives of people, their hopes and fears and the experiences of slavery. Her poems depict the pain and exertion of former slaves and their seemingly sheer inability to deal with their enmities in a world that used and debased them. Her poetry is painful and realistic picture of American Society of White supremacy.

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