A Study of Brown's Clotel and Slave-narrative

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Abstract: The arousal of Black consciousness was what Brown aimed at through Clotel; Or, the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States, the first book of fiction ever written by a Black American. Written almost as a sequel to his autobiography Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Brown's Clotel boldly and unabashedly focuses attention on the evils of the "peculiar institution" of slavery by trying to "shake into wakefulness a mass human conscience which had slumbered far too long" (Whitlow 1974:46). Himself an escaped slave the son of a white father and a mulatto slave mother who was allegedly the daughter of Daniel Boone -Brown was able to give to Clotel added vehemence and startling realism because he himself had either experienced or witnessed the horrors and the evils that are described in the novel. Referring to this, Sterling A. Brown (1969:39) writes, "Scattered throughout the book are intimate glimpses that only one who had been a slave could get." This paper aims to examine the trace of slave narrative in William W. Brown’s Clotel.

Key words: Brown, Clotel, American Literature, Slave Narratives, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

The credit for being the first Black American novelist goes to William Wells Brown. His Clotel was published in 1853, interestingly, not in America but in distant London. While he did not invent any new genre or even attitude, Brown, nevertheless, took the first giant leap from slave narratives to "Black" fiction. His novel and those written by his early successors assume added importance because, writes Herzog (1983:121), Reading the early fiction by Black Americans after having been immersed in the study of 'great' writers like Hawthorne and Melville, or a 'minor' but seemingly 'all-American' writer like Harriet Beacher Stowe, is like wandering into foreign territory. "In the beginning was slavery, and it prevented the Word from becoming flesh," writes Bone (1966:11), in order to explain the dearth of literary works written by Black authors during the initial two-and-a-half centuries that the Blacks spent in America. This explains why the contribution of Black writers to American literature was almost negligible after the mid-nineteenth century. This paucity serves an important and convenient purpose -it makes it very easy for us to nominate the novel by which the Black authors made a transition from nonfiction to fiction.

William Wells Brown’s Clotel and Slave-narrative:

Brown was in England when the Fugitive Slave law was passed in 1850, having been sent there by the Garrisonians to enlist English support for the abolitionist cause. Since he was a fugitive slave himself he could not return to America immediately. Staying back in England, he continued with his lectures and exhibitions, and in 1853 he published Clotel, the novel that marks the birth of Black American fiction. Clotel was based on a rumor, never convincingly proved or disproved, about the sale for $1,000 in New Orleans of a mulatto daughter of a slave named Sally Hemings and President Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence. In 1848, Brown had included in his The Anti-slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs, a song entitled "Jefferson's Daughter". This rumor gave Brown an opportunity to discuss the leitmotiv of the novel -the sexual aspect of slavery. Through the incident about the sale of Currer, the President's mistress, and her beautiful daughters Clotel and Althesa at an auction in Richmond, the author tries to expose the issues of moral depravity and the undermining of the sacred institution of marriage, which are the inevitable results of the "patriarchal institution" of slavery. "The Quadroons," a story published in 1846 by the noted abolitionist lydia Maria Child provided Brown with the main plot of the novel. The last three chapters dealing with Clotel's daughter Mary and her lover George are based on a story Brown had included in his travel book, Three Years in Europe: Or Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met (1847).

Moving at an alarmingly fast pace, Clotel deals with the misfortunes and miseries that the daughters of Jefferson, Clotel and Althesa, have to endure when they, along with their mother Currer, are placed on the auction block. With one stroke Brown (1972:43) exposes the hypocrisy of the slave-holding society when, after describing the baseness and coarseness of the auctioneer and the buyers, he says of Clotel's sale: The maiden was struck for that sum. This was a Southern auction, at which the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen were sold for five hundred dollars; her moral character for two hundred; her improved intellect for one hundred; her Christianity for three hundred; and her chastity and virtue...
for four hundred dollars mere. And this, too, in a city thronged with churches whose ministers preach that slavery is a God-ordained institution!

Indeed, so pathetic and heart-rending does Brown make this picture of beauty and virtue in distress that it prompts Herzog (1983:133) to compare Clotel with Hawthorne's Hester Prynne. One need only add that the author succeeds in making this moving picture even more poignant when he makes it clear that the case of Currer and her daughters was not an isolated incident of untold sufferings. That it was a common, everyday occurrence becomes abundantly clear when, in the "Preface" to Clotel, Brown (1972:xix) states explicitly: "On every foot of soil over which Stars and Stripes wave, the negro is considered common property, on which any white man may lay his hand with perfect impunity."

The rest of the novel is a tragic, cheerless, melodramatic and digressive saga of slave-suffering and sorrow, which moves across the length and breadth of America -as though to point out how far-reaching the ill-effects of slavery are through Richmond, New Orleans, Natchez, Kentucky and Ohio, through Canada, and finally, through Europe. The novel ends with Clotel escaping from the clutches of a tyrannical master and then returning to rescue her daughter whom she had left behind. On reaching Virginia Clotel is detected, captured and sent to a slave prison which, symbolically, "stands midway between the capital at Washington and the president's house" (ibidem:175), which had, ironically, been occupied by her father at one time. While trying to escape she finds herself trapped on Long Bridge and in a fit of desperation she lays down her life at the altar of liberty.

The scene, one of the better-known "escape" sequences in nineteenth century Black literature, would lose much of its melodramatic poignancy if one were to try to paraphrase it. Brown (ibidem:177) writes, On came the profane and ribald crew, faster than ever, already exulting in her capture, and threatening punishment for her flight. For a moment she looked wildly and anxiously around to see if there was no hope of escape. On either hand, far down below, rolled the deep foamy waters of the Potomac, and before and behind the rapidly approaching step and noisy voices of pursuers, showing how vain would be any further effort for freedom. Her resolution was taken. She clasped her hands convulsively and raised them, as she at the same time raised her eyes towards heaven, and begged for that mercy and compassion there, which had been denied her on earth; and then, with a single bound, she vaulted over the railings of the bridge, and sunk for ever beneath the waves of the river!

Brown's cryptic comments tell the readers all "" that they might want to know about the author's views on American slavery as well as American hypocrisy and its dual standards about human liberty. He goes on to say, Had Clotel escaped from oppression in any other land, and reached the United States, no honor within the gift of the American people would have been too good to have been heaped upon the heroic woman. But she was a slave, and therefore out of the pale of the sympathy (ibidem).

Clotel's daughter Mary is the only one of the mulatto slave girls in the novels who does not come to a "tragic" end. Since her mother "dies" before she can rescue Mary, the daughter goes through the usual process of safe and resale till she meets a handsome near-white slave George, who has been imprisoned for taking part in the Nat Turner insurrection. Mary rescues George from certain death when, after having exchanged clothes with him, she stays behind in his cell while George escapes. This is where the 1853 edition of Clotel ends, with Clotel laying down her life for her daughter, while her daughter Mary risks her own liberty for the sake of her lover. The fact, however, remains that, of all the slave characters in the novel, it is only Clotel and Mary who make an effort towards attaining freedom, either for themselves or for their dear ones. This, according to Brown, is a very sad commentary on the nature and the effects of the system of human bondage. Referring to Clotel and Mary's bravery, Pryse very correctly states that "Society's stigma has given them a vision of freedom that is the special gift of scapegoats, and they find their identity in acting upon that vision" (Herzog 1983:137). Brown laments that only a few slaves are strong enough to rise thus; most of them die helplessly and un lamented, as do Currer, Althesa, Ellen and Jane.

On his return to America from Britain, Brown published three other versions of Clotel with different titles, character-names and even, to some extent, different plots. In the winter of 1860-61, from 30 November 1860 to 16 March 1861, The Weekly Anglo-African published Miralda, Or the Beautiful Quadroon: A Romance of American Slavery Founded on Fact, in serial form. This version of Clotel simplifies the plot and softens much of the antislavery argument found in its predecessor. While the basic situation remains the same as in Clotel, many of the characters as well as the conclusion of the novel are changed and modified. Clotel is now named Isabelle while Mary, who has become Miralda, instead of rescuing the near-white George, now rescues the heroic Black Jerome. Miralda herself is rescued from slavery by a Frenchman and is taken to Europe where she meets and marries Jerome, when her French savior dies. In their travels across Europe, Miralda and Jerome come across the former's white father who expresses his repentance for his behavior towards his wife and child by accepting Jerome and Miralda into his family and by promising to set his slaves in Virginia free.

In the next revision, named Ciotelle: A Tale of the Southern States and published in 1864, Miralda is named Clotel. The most interesting change is that, in this edition, an unnamed United States senator replaces President Jefferson as Currer's husband and the plot is accordingly altered. Furthermore, Clotel (1864) is
smoother, gentler and less aggressive than the two editions that preceded it; so much so that it was given to the Union soldiers in the Civil War to be read in their spare time. The final version of Clotel was published in 1867 as Clotel: Or, The Colored Heroine: A Tale of the Southern States. In this revision, four chapters were added to the 1864 edition and they altered the conclusion of the novel considerably. Towards the end of Clotel (1867), Clotel and Jerome return to America to aid the Union at the outbreak of the Civil War. Jerome dies sat Port Hudson while fighting heroically in a "Negro" regiment. Clotel becomes an "Angel of Merle" and, passing for white, goes to the aid of imprisoned soldiers at Andersonville where she helps 93 of them to escape. After emancipation and the end of the war, Clotel uses her money -Brown stresses that it is Clotel's own money that is being used -to establish a "Freedmen's School" in Mississippi.

Various critics have reacted in various ways to the revisions and re-visions of Clotel. Farrison (1969:328) is of the opinion that Brown did not improve upon Clotel by writing Miralda, neither in art nor in argument. On the other hand, Heermance (1969:133) says that Clotelle (1867) "gives us our understanding of the artist who is finally pleased enough with his work so that he does not revise it again." Yellin (1972:174), too, calls Miralda a "marked improvement" to the character of her near-white counterpart George. An interesting fact about these revisions is that as with each new edition Clotel became more conventional and sentimental, in style and subject matter, and as the aggressive stance and the explicit charges of racism levelled against the North were softened, the book became more and more popular in America. However, present day readers will certainly find it easier to identify with the 1853 edition of Clotel, inspire of all its digressions, coarseness, attempts at propaganda, jagged edges and melodrama, than with its milk and-water off springs. It is, DeVries (1973:242) states, "easy for us today to identify with the first edition's realism and irony and to understand the more forceful aspects of its message." Consequently, one feels inclined to agree with Herzog (1983:144) who writes that, "Clotel, though the most uneven, is yet the most forceful version of the novel." Undoubtedly, it is this version that, more than any of its subsequent editions, abounds in forceful, convincing and impelling antislavery arguments, which twentieth century readers can easily identify with.

Color and class distinctions receive due attention in Clotel, as also in its revised editions. However, one has to admit that Brown's own attitude to color distinctions, as it comes across in his "novels," is very ambivalent. Initially, he has made George a near-white who could pass for White and who was "somewhat ashamed of his African descent" (Brown 1972:189). In the subsequent versions, George is transformed into the Black hero Jerome as though to express Brown's faith in the valor and dignity of a Black hero. Brown's heroines are, however, without exception mulattoes, the darkest of them being fair enough to pass for a Spaniard or an Italian. In the first edition of Clotel, except for Sam, "one of the blackest of his race" (ibidem:99), there is no other important Black character in the entire novel. It is not as though Brown himself was unaware of the stratification among Blacks of different shades. He comments on it when he narrates the incident where the Vicksburg merchant's wife makes Clotel cut her hair short, causing much glee among the "full-blooded negroes in the dwelling" (ibidem:114). So it is clear that although Brown was not actually indifferent towards the full-blooded Blacks, he apparently sympathized just a wee bit more with mulattoes such as Clotel, than he did with them (Trent 1971).

After reading Clotel, one feels inclined to agree with Davis (1972:xii) when he says that, in the beginning, to Brown white was seemingly 'right, and black was not beautiful. Although he probably was not aware of his position, Brown strongly implies that it is a deeper tragedy for near-whites to be enslaved than for darker Negroes, as though they had a greater sensitivity and therefore suffered more than the blacks.

Thus the only person who suffers as much as the near-white heroines is the white Salome, who is mistakenly sold off into slavery, to be disowned by her white husband, when he gets to know about her being "a slave". However, with age, Brown's attitude to color changed considerably and he appears to have become more conscious of the dignity of the Blacks as he grew older. Thus, Clotel's near-white George, who had meekly studied and become a partner in a firm in England on becoming free, gets transformed, in Miralda, to the pure Black Jerome who is self-respecting, aggressive, proud and heroic enough to lay down his life for the Union during the Civil War. Eventually, Brown became a radical and fervent supporter of the concept of racial identity and equality and "was able to portray blacks in ... [such a way as to express through them] his own outsider's existence, his vision, and his concrete engagement" (Herzog 1983:144).

For all its merits, Clotel is, by no means, a flawless book. Brown was very fond of digressions and he tries to cram too much in too short a space for the book to be ever called an artistic success. Most of his characters are one-dimensional, passive creations, who never really come alive; not one of them can be called immortal or even memorable. Most of his heroines seem to be cast in the same mould and to be painted with the same brush. Indeed, it is often very difficult to distinguish between his innumerable mulattoes. Furthermore, the latter versions of Clotel lack much of the vigor and force that the "1853 edition possessed.

However, inspite of all the shortcomings that are clearly there in Clotel, its author himself comes across as, writes Whitlow (1974:46), "a man dedicated to the ideal of social justice, as were such diverse authors as Dickens, Hardy, Sinclair, and Steinbeck."One has also to remember that it was Brown who, with dote/, sowed the seeds for a new genre in Black literature. Understanding the real merit of the book, Davis (1972:xvi)
concludes in his "Introduction" to Clotel! by asserting, Whatever its stylistic faults or virtues may be, there is a kind of rugged honesty in Clotel, and we leave the work impressed. Its awkwardness, its didacticism and its sentimentality in some strange way conspire to serve Brown's purpose: to show that slavery was a vicious and evil experience for all concerned. That is obviously the correct spirit in which Clotel! should be approached and the best compliment that can be paid to it.

REFERENCES