

Representation Of The Autobiographical Self: Recritiquing Rita Dove's Thomas And Beulah

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Abstract: Rita Dove's poetic volume Thomas and Beulah (1986) is a venture on her part to record diverse aspects of her grandparents' lives and various problems and issues faced by them during their lifetime. Though the project seems to be an ambitious one, as the poet has to delve deep into the past of her grandparents in their absence, depending most often on the stories and anecdotes she had heard as a child, she has successfully represented their lives in verse. This reminds us of Paul Ricoeur's concept that autobiographical narratives cannot be separated from memory. Dove's attempt to bring the 'silenced' subalterns who are incapable of exert their voice, to the centre from the periphery that they have been cast into by the hegemonic oppressive powers, can be seen as an attempt on her own level to interrogate the age old imperialistic outlook. The central characters of the volume – Thomas and Beulah, the grandparents of the poet – are undoubtedly a part of the subaltern blacks, particularly in the white dominated American cultural context. To put them as the central characters and to write about their personal feelings and experiences was certainly a challenging task as far as the acceptability in the white dominated society was concerned. But Dove seems to have overcome the risk too easily as the volume not only secured her the coveted Pulitzer Prize in literature in the very next year of its publication, but also established her as one of the most vocal African American literary figures.

Of late, autobiography has been unanimously acclaimed as a powerful literary form, and critics have variously problematized it in terms of confession as well as fiction. It was Saint Augustine, who for the first time conceptualized autobiography as confession (*Confessions*) within the framework of spirituality. For Augustine, autobiography as confession was not necessarily celebration of the self, but surrender of the self before God with purity, frankness and innocence. Whereas for Augustine, autobiography was a spiritually ordained art, the romantics like Rousseau (*Confessions*) transformed spirituality into an assertive celebration of the subjective self which is strongly reminiscent of Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" as adumbrated in the *Prelude*. As civilization progressed, modern scholars and critics added a secular twist to autobiography as a literary form by emphasizing authenticity, development of personality, importance of authorial voice and intention, and also the importance of memory, re-memory, recollection of history and culture.

Philippe Lejeune in his seminal essay "The Autobiographical Pact" defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular, the story of his personality" (4). Laura Marcus (1994: 3) on the other hand, emphasizes autobiographical intention on the ground that behind the text, the author always controls the meaning. In other words, the author becomes the guarantor of "intentional meaning" of truth embodied in the text. Marcus' argument emphasizes the fact that intention plays a necessary and unquestionable role to negotiate between the author, the narrator and the protagonist. Roy Pascal (1960) carries the argument of Lejeune and Marcus forward by emphasizing the 'intention' as 'honest' and the honesty is based on the fact that the author and the text should be trusted by the reader. To Pascal, autobiography is grounded upon seriousness of the author – a seriousness that determines his personality and his intention behind the writing of the autobiography (60). Paul Ricoeur, in his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) furnishes a phenomenology of

memory – memory as a potential for retaining the past (22). Ricoeur's emphasis on memory points to the fact that an autobiographical narrative cannot be separated from memory and the above theoretical analysis on autobiography and memory can be satisfactorily applied to the autobiographical negotiation of the self in black literature in general and the poetry of Rita Dove in particular.

A cursory glance at African American autobiographical slave narratives right from Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neal Hurston, Friedrich Douglass, Maya Angelou and Zitkala Sa reveals that racism and a desperate desire for liberation of the blacks from the clutches of white hegemony constitute the moot point in slave narratives. Both Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou became victims of white gender hegemony and candidly expressed their gender humiliation by directly negotiating with the readers which is reminiscent of Laura Marcus' threefold negotiations among the autobiographer, the narrator and the reader. Hurston in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) celebrates, like Walt Whitman, 'I' as the champion of the black race protesting against the violent white gender hegemony. However, critics observe that Hurston's autobiographical writings foreground the individual over the community, whereas Maya Angelou in her poem "Still I Rise" and autobiographies like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) *Singin' and Swingin'* (1976) and *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) – established autobiography as confession by honestly laying bare the ritual of torture inflicted upon her by the white which not only made her virtually mute under the impact of terrible trauma, but also made her decidedly rebellious to interrogate gender hegemony with a spirit of resistance and protest. Angelou's autobiographical self revolted against racism, white ego, gender hegemony and traditional concept of morality thereby signaling the birth of the "new black women" – a free bird that can never be caged. While lambasting patriarchal culture, white gender hegemony and the stigma of racial discrimination, Maya's autobiographical series signify her psychological, spiritual and political odyssey illuminating the history and culture of African American consciousness. Her autobiographical strategy finds further fillip in Rita Dove's poetry on one hand and in the fiction of Toni Morrison on the other.

Rita Dove carves a secured niche of her own in the contemporary literary scenario and her poetry encompasses many-sided themes that are closely connected to the African American life, history, culture, dreams and aspirations. This is all the more evident from the poems accommodated in her volumes titled *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), *Museum* (1983), *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), *Grace Notes* (1989), *Mother Love* (1995), *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999) and *American Smooth* (2004), wherein she encapsulates various historical figures, cultural motives and mythological characters closely associated with the black past and culture. Her Pulitzer Prize winning poetic volume *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) is a venture on her part to record diverse aspects of her grandparents' lives and various problems and issues faced by them during their lifetime. Though the project seems to be an ambitious one, as the poet has to delve deep into the past of her grandparents in their absence, depending

most often on the stories and anecdotes she had heard as a child, she has successfully represented their lives in verse on the basis of memory and recollection. This is reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur's concept that autobiographical narratives cannot be separated from memory. Dove tends to bring to the fore the condition of the 'silenced' subalterns, who are incapable of asserting their voice under the clutches of the hegemonic powers. The central characters of the volume – Thomas and Beulah, the grandparents of the poet – are undoubtedly a part of the subaltern blacks, particularly in the white dominated American cultural context. To put them as the central characters and to write about their personal feelings and experiences was certainly a challenging task as far as the acceptability in the white dominated society was concerned. But Dove seems to have overcome the risk too easily as the volume not only secured her the coveted Pulitzer Prize in literature in the very next year of its publication, but also established her as one of the prolific African American literary figures. The entire volume of poems revolves round the two figures and the upheavals of their lives most of which are caused by the colonial as well as racial biasness. The blacks – including Thomas and Beulah – are in the periphery or the marginal space of the collective consciousness of the white populace of America, and therefore in this paper, an attempt has been made to examine how Dove has tried to dislodge them from the periphery and put them in the centre by exploring the unrecorded history of the blacks in America.

Following the strategy of biographical narrative, the first three poems of the volume cover the beginning of Thomas' journey from Tennessee towards North with his inseparable friend Lem which constitutes the tragic "event" that marks the whole life, and his arrival in Akron, (Ohio) in 1921. The Great Migration of the twentieth century is conceived of here specifically in terms of individual destiny. In the poem "Jiving", for instance, Dove has successfully contrasted the two places: one that her grandfather had left behind, the natural 'river-bright' Tennessee and the other the industrial 'dingy' Akron that he is heading to. It is the need of the hour or the survival strategy that prompted the blacks to migrate from the natural environment of the South to the growingly industrial North. Dove, the biographer, becomes quite comprehensive in her approach to the past as we find that the degrading condition of the labour that the young migrants found in the North is artfully expressed in the poem "Straw Hat". But the seriousness of the narrative expressing the poignant situation faced by the migrants is replaced by a romantic fancifulness in the next poem "Courtship" where Thomas in his yellow scarf asks Beulah for the pleasure of a date:

*"Fine evening may I have
the pleasure..."* [Italics in original]

This is certainly a manifestation of the various dimensions of the grandparents' lives that the poet portrays in her poems. The poet has not only fixed her lens to the historically significant events related to her grandparents' lives, but also expanded her ken to their essentially private moments. Thomas' courting of Beulah can be taken as an instance in this regard, and it also symbolically represents the essentially human nature of the blacks. Though their fate was marred by the onslaught of the legacy of slavery coupled with poverty

and apathy, the grandparents of the poet were not devoid of human feelings. While dealing with the issues, Dove takes recourse to history on one hand and memory on the other – thereby furnishing a fine fusion of past and history with present and memory.

The poem “Nothing Down” is an ironic play on Thomas’ sense of American dream. As he and his wife choose a new car to pay by installments for a return trip to Tennessee, he is at the same time aware of all the bad things that he and his friend Lem had planned to escape. He is also haunted by the past memories of family closeness and the freedom of his childhood. He feels locked into the traumatic memories and is still living in a racist culture, subject to racial abuse by the whites. In much the same way, “The Zeppelin Factory” details Thomas’ loss of confidence in those difficult years of 1930s whereas the two poems of the period of the Second World War namely, “Aircraft” and “Aurora Borealis” show Thomas as a shrunken figure: his frustrations within the family are intensified in the workplace:

“Too frail for combat, he stands
before an interrupted wing” (“Aircraft”)
and
“Thomas walks out of the movie house
And forgets where he is.
He is drowning and
The darkness above him
Spits and churns.” (“Aurora Borealis”)

In the above quoted lines, we find an apt representation of not only the physical condition of Thomas (“too frail to combat”), but also his mental disdain. His mental condition as reflected by forgetting “where he is” and by the symbols of “spits and churns” is an outcome of a mind heavily burdened with the sense of guilt after viewing in the movie house the dropping of two atom bombs in Japan. As America was responsible for the tragedy in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Thomas feels the pang of guilt not as a black, but as an American.

The title of the poem “One Volume Missing” suggests the written record of Thomas’ life with Lem’s death as a significant incident. The cover of the encyclopedia that he buys brings back him the memories of his past. The missing last volume of the encyclopedia can be symbolically interpreted as the last part of Thomas’ life which is yet to be fulfilled. Thomas’ life, as portrayed in the volume, has been a charming one, endowed by his intimate friend Lem, and a haunted one, most often by the past memories of separation and death.

Apart from telling the story of her grandparents in a third person narrative, Dove also involves the characters in telling the same. “Roast Possum”, for instance, is a poem with nostalgic anecdote, a tell tale of his childhood in Wartrace, Tennessee, which Thomas relates to his grandchildren with much enthusiasm. His grandson Malcolm actively participates in the story and this provides Thomas an opportunity to recount the events with some advice:

*You got to be careful
with a possum when he’s on the ground;
he’ll turn on his back and play dead
till you give up looking.* (“Roast Possum”)

The speaker is none other than Thomas himself, who in a jovial mood passes his intimate moments with his grandchildren, often telling stories and giving them some advices in-between. The poet being one of the grandchildren, gets sometimes the opportunity to listen to his stories, that in turn form very crucial elements in her poems.

Dove also gives an extended account of Thomas’ activities towards the last part of his life. In “The Satisfaction Coal Company”, Dove portrays Thomas during his days of retirement when he passes his time by occasionally going back to the days in the thirties when he had a part time job:

“They were poor then but everyone had been poor.

...

*Those nights walking home alone,
the bucket of coal scraps banging his knee,
he’d hear a roaring furnace*

with its dry, familiar heat. (“The Satisfaction Coal Company”)

Poverty was undoubtedly a constant companion in the blacks’ life journey in America. And Thomas’ condition described in the above quotation is representative of millions of other blacks. Their “walking home alone” is suggestive of the sense of alienation from the mainstream society that hardly regards them as human. At the same time, the “roaring furnace” inside the coal factory can be regarded as the pent up feelings of dissatisfaction and anger among the blacks.

The last poem of the sequence namely “Thomas at the Wheel” is about Thomas’ death due to his heart failure. The title of the poem is ironic in the sense that his life, lived through the Depression and two world wars, through years of racial inequality and large scale industrial transitions, has not been one in which he could ever confidently have felt in command. Even his youthful act of self assertion and choice in migrating to North was marked by tragedy. Taken together, the last three poems of the sequence *Mandolin* namely “The Stroke”, “The Satisfaction Coal Company” and “Thomas at the Wheel” are a representation of his old age. They are expressed in large part from Thomas’ own perspective of being a long black sufferer. The narrative mode modulates between his retelling of the experiences to others and his own interior consciousness of the events. Philippe Lejeune’s concept of autobiography as a “retrospective” narrative can be applied to Dove’s presentation of the black figures in *Thomas and Beulah*.

In consonance with Thomas’ perspective revealed in the first part titled “Mandolin”, Dove represents the perspective of her grandmother in the second sequence titled “Canary in Bloom”. Beulah’s life, as we find, is represented as more inwardly lived and restricted than that of Thomas. Her dreams are fantasies based on certain kinds of deprivation and non-fulfillment. The first poem, “Taking in Wash” sets the note of women accommodating to and working around the whims of men but also having to be resolute and strong. Being a drunkard, Beulah’s father was a person whom his wife always had to put up with as “he came home / swaying as if the wind touched only him.”

Thomas’ energetic courting and Beulah’s initial indifference to it is aptly represented in the poem “Courtship, Diligence” where Beulah doesn’t even bother to call Thomas’ mandolin a ‘cigar-box music’. But once their marriage took

place, they came up like an ideal couple. Married life for Beulah is a life of domestic service both outside and inside her own home. The poem "Dusting" renders the painstaking outward routine of her existence and her inward dependence upon memory and imagination as a solace to her spirit. Just as she dusts the objects with great care, so does she dust down her memories of her teenage romance. This is a poem of transference from the present confinement to the freedom of the past, from the claustrophobia of the room to the 'rage of light' (Righelato 94). Yet in the transference between her actions and her interior life, each is imbued with something of the quality of the other:

"Each dust
Stroke a deep breath"

The mutual friendly relationship between Thomas and Beulah is reflected in poems like "Weathering Out" where the pregnant Beulah goes with her husband Thomas to see the new Zeppelin Air Dock. As pregnant she is, she compares her own condition to that of the Zeppelin: "large and placid, a lake".

As a typical housewife, Beulah's life is centered round her family and neighborhood. Dove's grace of spirit in rendering this life without imposing on it an obviously feminist retrospective agenda of deprivation is evident in "The House on the Bishop Street" (Righelato 96). Throughout her work, she was preoccupied with defined space, the shelter of house and neighborhood:

"No front yard to speak of,
just a porch cantilevered on faith
where she arranged the canary's cage."

"Obedience" is a poem that accords Beulah some imaginative space and authority. As she ages, her body slackens, *obedient* to time, but her imagination becomes more imperative:

"Her body no longer tender, but her mind is free
She can think up a twilight..." ("Obedience")

In her middle age, Beulah moves into the sphere of work outside the home, which entails an adjustment of her fantasies as she encounters white racism more directly than when shielded at home. Interested in fashion and make-up, Beulah faces one problem: the lack of black models for women to follow. She both resists and is attracted to cinematic images of white feminine glamour.

Whereas the slave narratives by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs reflect the forces of slavery in the past and the autobiographies of Maya Angelou expose how racial discrimination still vitiates the African American life at present, Dove comes out with a broader vision and perspective by incorporating not only her personal experiences, but also the life events of significant black figures in her poetry. And in *Thomas and Beulah*, she encrypts the real life story of two old black people – apparently the grandparents of the poet – in a verse form, whereby she does not only intimate the reader about the past of the blacks, but also takes the reader back to the past. At the same time, she makes the reader realize the differences between the whites and the blacks on one hand and

the present and the past generations on the other. But leaving aside all these poetic credentials of the poet, the poetic volume *Thomas and Beulah* is also a medium of protest for the poet.

What is not recorded in the standard and canonical books of the white is given a beautiful expression in the volume under review. What is trivial for the standard white canon of literature is more than trivial for the black or the poet herself. Be it a 'straw hat' or a dilapidated 'mandolin', everything associated with the old couple has a greater significance for the marginalized blacks. By her work laced with biographical and autobiographical references, Dove has succinctly expressed the fact that the blacks in America have substantial contribution towards the national history of America, though the whites are not ready to accept the fact. If the whites in America can occupy the central position in the socio-cultural ethos for being white; the blacks can equally claim for the same for their immense contribution to the economic uplift and the Nation building procedure.

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