(Re) Writing the Slave Experiences: The Case of the Cape Coast Castle

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Abstract: Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang’s Cape Coast Castle provides an insight into the slave experience and adds more to the reader’s understanding of the poet’s world view of the slave experiences. The purpose of this paper is to examine the collection of poems in Cape Coast Castle and to show how the poems help (re)write the slave experiences. The poet situates the experiences in a symbolic moment and provides an entry point to the (re)writing of the history of slavery on the west coast of Africa. This also provides an opportunity to disclose and criticise what has been silenced. We also highlight some of the images employed by the poet to help the reader have a better appreciation of the slave experiences and also to evoke a collective resolve to challenge the people to forge ahead.

Key words: Castle, history, images, reso, rewriting, slavery

INTRODUCTION

Creative writers “have looked long and hard at life in their societies and, as a result, arrived at an interpretation of their world” (Yankson, 1996). They serve as social activists whose moral obligation is to salvage society from oppression, decadence and amnesia. Indeed, the writer cannot afford to be disinterested and passive when “serious” social issues need to be commented on and when history beckons him to react.

Anybody reading Cape Coast Castle may agree that this collection of poems recounts the history of the slavery on the continent. The poet’s overriding thought is a national and global intention for the need to (re) write the history of the slave experience. This is supported by the fact that Ghana has many of the reminders of the traumatic experiences of slavery, the single most important assault on the continent, which constantly inspire creative reflection on the experience (Okunoye, 2010).

As we read the three parts of the collection, we become fascinated with the view that the continent and the world should not take “refuge in amnesia” when it comes to the issue of slavery. The aim of this study is to explore how Opoku-Agyemang’s (1996) Cape Coast Castle responds to the need to re-visit, re-think and re-write the history of the slave experiences. The poems considered in this study narrate a history whose archives are impossible to fully retrieve.

In Cape Coast Castle, Opoku-Agyemang’s (1996) intent is to address the experiences of Africans during the era of the slave trade, a moment of much emotional trauma, and psychological distress. Opoku-Agyemang’s (1996) selection of the title Cape Coast Castle is conscious and significant. The title portrays the momentous role of Cape Coast Castle in the transatlantic slave trade, the greatest forced migration in the history of mankind. Cape Coast Castle became the greatest symbol of the harrowing slavery experience in the whole of Africa. William (2007) states that:

Cape Coast Castle, which lies almost on the same meridian as London was the headquarters in Africa of the entire British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. For 143 years (1664-1807) it was, in the words of its British governors, the grand emporium of the British slave trade. From this building perched on the shore of the South Atlantic Ocean, men, women, children born in Africa were sold to British slave ships and carried to the West Indies, to North and South America, and to destinations elsewhere.

Again, Clair is convinced that the rewriting of the African slavery experience is important because of the attempt by British historians to “…ignore, downplay, or brush aside the slaving era as regrettable preliminary to the glorious British Christian imperialism that followed”. The dialogue between Anowa and her grandmother in Anowa is ample evidence of why the need to (re) write the history of slavery on the continent:

Nana, why did they build the house?
I asked
I must escape from you child.
They say… they said they built the
Big house to keep the slaves.
What is a slave, Nana?
Shut up! It is not good that a child should ask big questions.
A slave is one who is bought and sold
Where did the white men get the slaves?
I asked.
You frighten me, child
You must be a witch, child
They got them from the land.

. . . .
You are frightening me, Child
I was not there!
It is not there!
It is too long ago!
No one talks of these things anymore
All good men and women try to forget
They have forgotten!

Indeed, all “good men” and “women” cannot afford to be disinterested when a “serious” issue such as slavery needs to be commented on. In effect, the poet cannot be passive when

... the men of the land sell other men of the land, and women and children to pale men from beyond the horizon ...

The responses of Nana in the flashback are very suggestive: they expose a community’s complicity with the slave trade and also indicate a request to ignore or forget the history which Opoku-Agyemang (1996) advocates (Cape Coast Castle) the continent must confront. According to Okunoye (2010), Cape Coast Castle is an attempt

...to compel a journeying back in space and time to reflect on the assault of history as it seeks to locate black peoples and their conditions in time.

His is an expression of the people’s bitter experiences of deprivation and in his poetry, we notice the depth, passion and lyricism in solidarity with the people affected by slavery and a corresponding faith in their aspiration and will to (re) write their history about the slave trade. Anyidoho (2000) states that:

“Among the metaphors that dominate the cultural history and landscape of the modern state of Ghana, a few key ones call for special attention and consideration: the Sankofa bird, Ananse the Spiderman, the primal drum, and the slave fort or castle

As acknowledged earlier, the title of this collection of poems, Cape Coast Castle, is not a surprise because apart from the “castle” being an “edifice” and a “metaphor”, it is “knotty, full of discrepancies and confused codes, (it) rules by silence” (Opoku-Agyemang, 1996). The reader is confronted with a variegated weave of ideas about the slave experience of torture, hate and innocence. Cape Coast Castle as a collection of poems has three parts viz Part One introduced by “introit”, Part Two begins with “Connections” and “Theogony” heralds Part Three. These divisions are very suggestive as they are at the core of the subject of (re)writing the history of the slave experience.

Part I: Cape Coast Castle:
The first poem in Part 1 is “Introit.” The word ‘introit’ has a religious connotation, referring to part of the opening of the celebration of the Mass in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. Generally, the ‘introit’, which is sung or spoken, is related to the theme of the celebration of the Mass. It could also refer to a short prayer which is said or sung as the celebrant is entering the sanctuary to celebrate Mass or Holy Communion. Thus, the first poem, “Introit”, can be considered as a hymn or short prayer by the poet recounting the many stories of slavery:

There are many sad stories
Carved in indifferent stones
There is always another story
After this is told

Perhaps the poet’s song is an attempt to narrate the story of slavery that has partially recorded or distorted. The people were mostly captured at dawn and what remains are the “bones” to tell the sad stories since many of the slaves died on the way to the coast and were left to rot. The image of the sea “foaming at the mouth” paints a mental picture of the many bodies floating on the sea because they could not survive the journey to the New World. There were many who were killed in slave wars and those who could not endure the tortuous journey to the coast. The mention of “bones”, “waves”, “boats” and “sea” represents “the single most traumatic body of experience in all our known history” (Opoku-Agyemang, 1996) and the high rates mortality. The image of the sea, though serving as a bridge between the New World and the African mainland, became a devourer during the slave era. It suggests an issue such as slavery is a big one which must be discussed by all. The “bones” have become the memories of the trade.

The “sea”, “waves”, “bones”, “castle” and “boats” helped perpetuate slavery which belongs to history. These legacies are an indication that slavery can occur again if people refuse to remember the sad stories in order to safeguard the future. This is because:
History does not repeat itself
It merely quotes us
When we have not been too wise

“The Watch” echoes the need for the poet to (re)write
the story of “defeat, captivity, humiliation, and death”
(Anyidoho, 1996). It is also to clear any doubts as to what
really happened:

Waiting to worry back
Every turning wind
That would scatter my word;
Waiting, will till freed
And my mouth cleared of all weed

The “waves” are a witness to the shipment of the
victims while “every fishing seagull’s cry” is an echo of
the torture and pain the people experienced on their
journey to the New World, what William (2007) refers to
as “the horrors of the ‘middle passage’, the five- or six-
week voyage”. The “castle” poses many questions which
“we have learned to forget, questions we are now afraid
to ask ourselves” (Anyidoho 1996). Answering these
questions is a way of healing the wounds and the poet also
believes this is “a reason to replant this land”, and again
a key to unlocking the “knotty…and confused code,”
(Opoku-Agyemang, 1996) since:

Too many sad stories are lost to stain
In the castle’s cracks and leaning turrets

The poet states that many “…people got carried away
by the bargain” and “The Watch” can be complete
when “…our memory (is) cleared of weed.”

In “of Ghosts and Guests,” the poet expresses his
anger and disgust with the law that did nothing to stop the
atrocities against humanity. On a visit to the Cape Coast
Castle, the grand slave emporium, the poet states:

And I heard the sweet siren of the dying
The ghosts and their guests clearing their throat

The visit is to find the wounds and “wash clean with
the iodine of pain” (Anyidoho, 1996). Nevertheless, the
poet’s apprehension in the enterprise of (re)writing the
history of the slave experience is summed up in:

Was I scared? I fear more the
Silence of the living

The silence must be broken and “the heavy burden of
permanent sorrow and of recurring seizures of rage” must
be purged (Anyidoho, 1996).

Opoku-Agyemang (1992) also thoroughly deals with
the Middle Passage and the experiences of the slaves in

“Howl the Waking Deep.” Deep mournful cry of pain
echoes in the poem. Rediker (2008), a Professor of
History in his book The Slave Ship, A Human History
recounts “DuBois referred, of course, to the entire
experience of slavery, but he knew that the slave ship was
a special circle of inferno. So did captains like James
D’Wolf and Richard Jackson, who turned their ships into
floating hells” (348). Rediker’s (2008) diction “hell”
abundantly captures or describes the Middle Passage
experience, which was characterized by suffering and
death which go beyond human imagination. Stephanie
(2007) argues that the slave ship and the Middle Passage presented two challenges to the African
slave, physical and metaphysical. He continues “With
regard to the physical challenges, its cavernous form
signaled an eerie emptiness demanding to be filled, a
powerful and dangerous capacity to consume. As for the
metaphysical aspect, the very habitat of the ship–the open
sea- challenged African cosmographies, for the landless
realm of the deep ocean did not figure in pre-colonial
West African societies as a domain of human(as opposed
to divine) activity” (124). Smallwood, like Rediker
(2008), vividly captures the traumatic situation when he
states that “the slave ship at sea reduced African captives
to an existence so physically atomized as silence all but
the most elemental bodily articulation, so socially
impoverished as to threaten annihilation of the self, the
complete disintegration of personhood” (125). The poet
wonders what thoughts that crossed the slaves’ minds as
they were led from the journey to the coast, through the
castle to the shore to board the slave ship.

Yet what thoughts kept them company
Kept mind cocooned
Breath-held against such infinitude?
What strength carried them?
Down the hollow wailing deep
Into the gut-root: there to die
Die again, be witness to unending death?

Indeed death stares them in the face. They are so
packed together that they see each other die. They are
always in shackles as they die out of pain anguish. The
poem also hints the reader that different parts of the
continent fell victim: “The faces that cling to us/Are of
places far and plenty.”

And to prevent the slaves from revolting they are
moved in the dark to be sold:

For the night is stark
We walk among the towering faceless

The slaves cannot identify the slavers who sell them
to other slave masters. “Castle”, “Church”, the “Cross”
suggest symbols that ironically perpetuated slavery. They
portray the image of the rapacious slavers. These are terms that connote the barbarity of those engaged in this trade. These words provide the poet with the material to examine and assess the impact of slavery. It is not surprising that the poet records instances of pain, torture that arise from the slave experience.

The images that are created are largely visual and auditory and the mood that permeates the Cape Coast Castle is that of horror and doom. The castle, by its sheer size, the grand emporium would have been an appropriate edifice for the worship of God, but it was used as a warehouse to store slaves. The slaves, by their circumstances, are the “carriers of the cross”. Ironically, they are not propagating the Word (of God) in the “Church big enough for God”. They are the beast of burden, “Hunchbacked by leaden piety”.

“The Executioner’s Dance” highlights the power of the slave masters to kill slaves. The recurring images are both visual and auditory and they help highlight the slave experience. The sea mourns as it remembers the dead who perished through no fault of theirs. Rediker (2008) pontificates the death rates when states that “…, but the sheer number of deaths remains staggering: nearly a million died throughout the slave trade, a little less than half of these in the commerce organized from British and American ports” 6. The “sea” and the “castle” become the most important images in this poem. The castle, the grand slave emporium receives the most condemnation since:

But no one knows the castle now
No one cares. Forgotten,
It sits blending by fading
And by ruining
Keeps a low profile

Sometimes both dead and live slaves were thrown overboard as the overloaded ships made their journey to the New World. This was to ensure the safety of the ships.

The careful coast pinned its future
To the fat sheep’s cargoes
And threw the rest to the sharks
The vultures of the sea
Our pain, no longer youthful
Steps with care
Among the rumbled gates;

Images of how cruel slavery can be gleaned from “fat ships” “cargoes,” “sharks” and “vultures”. The slaves have been reduced to the status of animals. The effects of the slave raids were that

Blood broke the ground
Made the spirit damp
Made bracken the stools of chiefs

Thus the sun went round and round
Like a mad man looking for his head

According to the poet, the people cannot wish away the slave experience and pretend it never happened. The reason is that:

Our pain, no longer muffled
Steps with a yelp
Among the bones of history

It is only human beings who seem to forget the past. Although the “castle” represents an important landmark in the history of slavery, “No one knows the castle now”. It is time to talk about the slave experience so that the trauma of death will be “transformed into the drama of life” (Anyidoho, 1996) Failure to do this means:

… anger hot and rude
Enters without knocking

“Sengbe Pieh” is an important poem whose theme is the freedom arising out of the valiant Africans who resisted slavery to regain their freedom. The poem opens with a little history about Sengbe Pieh who led a successful overthrow of the slavers and ordered the captain to sail to Africa.

Thus he searched everywhere
Looking for freedom in everything
He found it on deck in a spike

Although the poem is filled with terror, fear, and gloom, there is hope since those who died in the battle and even during the slave trade did so for “charity into a new order”.

Opoku-Agyemang (1992) shifts his focus to the pain and trauma mothers go through after losing their children to slavery. “Supplication: Equiano’s Mother”, which is in three parts, is a way of finding appropriate words to define the emotions of mothers. The effect of slavery is the deep sorrow of anguish. According to the poet, losing a son to slavery is more painful than child bearing: “Pain ripe beyond bearing”.

The reader is confronted with how to come to terms with what it is like for a mother to lose her children under inexplicable circumstances. There are echoes of repeated anguish, trauma and constant but fruitless probing are the lot of the women. The poet argues that with child bearing, the pain subsides after delivery but with a situation where a son (seed) is stolen by slavery the pain remains forever. The “seed” is to be nurtured to grow and bear more children but the seed that has been stolen means a generation has been uprooted.
The poet also compares the harrowing experience of the women to the agony of Christ.

She lived with animal pain:
The nails of Christ
Shriek pierce her naked side
Pain as supple shadows in the deep

Equiano’s mother visits the shrine to find answers to what happened to her son. Her efforts are fruitless as she loses her sanity:

Sometimes sitting by the wayside
Breaking nuts with the rats

She shouts her own name to the passing wind. Her insanity deepens. She unties two pieces of kola in her dream to see if ever her son will come back home. In the estimation of Equiano’s mother, the slave trade brought “endless death” and “No place is safe not even my own mouth.” There is a pun in the statement:

And the words that lie in it, how true are they
To the few who hear

There is the play on the word “lie.” The words or the history of slavery can remain in the mouths of people or be a lie which does not represent the true picture of the events that took place. Equiano’s mother’s question, “I ask you: why do they not return/Those who go?” is a request for us to “embark upon that difficult but inevitable quest for the origins of our contemporary predicament” (Anyidoho, 1996).

All in all, Equiano’s mother represents the countless number of mother’s who continue to weep over “graves without bodies” (Opoku-Agyemang, 1996).

“Equiano’s Retort” re-enacts the personal account of a victim of slavery. Equiano recounts what transpired that fateful day:

At dawn the raiders came
The men and the women were at the farm
They scattered the ash and the old people

The slave raiders are callous and they spread fear and terror all over the place. Pregnant women were not spared as the raiders:

Killed the young in their yolk
They spread anguish on rooftops

The poet indicates that despite “the evacuated pregnancy”, “the invading smell of death”, and torture, “Somehow the mind survives the past and the bareness of memory”. In addition,

In effect, the poet’s words today mumble and roar to tell the story of a people affected by slavery. “Pacotile” chronicles the articles for which the Africans were sold. There seems to be a bargain: “TAKE IT or leave it/ A deal is a deal:” The articles of the trade are “13 beads of coral, ½ a string of amber, 28 silver bells and 3 pairs of bracelets.” In return, the slave trader gets “One damned fine negro.”

“Schnapps and Brass Bin” also reveals other articles of the slave trade. The poet states
and concludes: “I don’t take guns/ or beads or gunpowder/
The next village does.”

Scarification depicts the act of making scars on the bodies of children and adults to prevent them from being captured as slaves. In “scarification”, the poet reveals the torture and pain especially at the peak of the slave trade. These were the scars left as a result of slavery. Swords slashed the greening flesh is indicative of the horrific picture of cutting the flesh of young people. The scars were made to prevent the young ones from being sold into slavery. This is ingenuity on the part of mothers:

Maame chased fingers
Over the route of the knife
Her face shone
The scar is hers, all is hers
Just as I am, too

The scars, like the castles and forts, have become indelible landmark that dot the land. The women also bear the scars.

In recounting the history of slavery, the poet says the experience was an eclipse since it was a dark moment in history. The castle as it stands is a symbol of the history of slavery. Nature, a witness to the atrocities, has decided to speak. The wind cannot remain passive so it talks about the experience:

The wind stands mouthing
Nothing can be heard
Except the rain roar of the past.

The past indeed harbours the history of slavery. The rain also “Recounts its story to the roof/ flash silver and sorrow”. The experience has become history. Although forgetfulness creeps in, the scars and castles are there as proof. “This history: a drop of amnesia…Is careful not to impose/ A gift of absence to the present.” In this poem, the slave castle becomes the central metaphor of betrayal, reconciliation departure and return. The sea seems to have been an accomplice in the illicit slave trade as it provided the passage to the New World. On the other hand, it also serves as the bridge between the New World and Africa and the poet intimates that “I can feel the sea gently rock our earth to sleep”.

In ‘Guided Tour to Cape Coast Castle,” the poet explains the justification for (re) writing the history of the slave experience. These are references to what has become the legacy of the slave trade. One of the castles has become the seat of government. This is in Osu, Accra.

The Cape Coast Castle has become a tourist attraction churning out a false history: In what seems like a dialogue with the tour guide, the poet remarks:

This castle, he explained
Served as a prison in the war.

In a bid to correct the erroneous impression created, the poet retorts “which war? I ventured”. The response is:

The Great War, he said over his shoulder
And the look he gave me
Said I should know better
We followed in a surge.

The dialogue tells the reader that the real history of the castle has been forgotten. The irony of the situation is that the castle has become a seat of government and a tourist attraction.

“What the Castle said” is unique because it expounds the role of the castle in the history of slavery. The castle is a witness and confesses: “I am at my edge endless like the sea/I cornered by sheer size an advantage of sorrows.”

The castle has been demonized and vilified for the active role it played in drowning the lamentation of the unfortunate slaves. Its sheer size has endowed it with “the power of silence, silence as the seduction and betrayal of power” (Opoku-Agyemang, 1996).

I am my own sea, the jungle drop
I crowd the litanies and the laments
With vain blood;
I laugh at the animal cries women make
I am the necklace of long irons they ear
The iron-collar crimson with suffering.

The “castle” boasts that many people perished under its watchful eyes and that “The formula for counting the dead lies in my belly”. Under the cover of darkness both dead and living beings were thrown into sea but the castle did not intervene. The “castle” today is not active as it pronounces, “I sleep in the silence of scars”. However, it concludes its confession by stating its usefulness in helping to (re) write the history of the slave experience: “I remain in the darkness of my whiteness”.

“In the Dungeon” recounts the slaves’ experiences in the dungeons as they await their shipment to the New World. The castle is a prison because it is a huge building standing by the sea “without windows”. It is also a warehouse for goods and slaves. The poet says: “There are dogs, wet-eyed/Without owners.” These dogs were there to prevent the slaves from escaping and this connotes slavers who were very mean. The reader is provided with a definition of a slave:

A slave is as naked
As a peeled vein
In a dream

It suggests that the slave is very vulnerable, a naked vein, unprotected, helpless, fragile and is stripped naked. The reference to “young voices” is an indication that most of the slaves captured were very young, that is, people who were not ready to face the challenges of life.
The poem also highlights the hypocrisy of religion as the slaves are assembled before a priest who prays for them prior to their shipment. The slaves have to respond “I am not worthy, Holy Lord”. This is a form of condemnation to a life of slavery. They are not worthy to live as human beings but rather worthy as slaves.

**Part II: People in me**
In “connections”, the purpose is to create a platform for the victims of slavery to provide the other half of the slave experience. It is the first poem of Part II. The poet reiterates:

Still I like to think
I am rich with kinsmen
Each birth calls me home.

Tracing the roots of the victims is a form of healing the wounds and a (re) writing of the history of slavery. He concludes:

I great all as friend and kin
Who have dissolved
Their names in my blood
And I, I look for myself
In their eyes

“Equiano: A Mother’s song” recounts the impact of slavery through the use of visual imagery. The reader is confronted with a mother experiencing an undeserving trauma because slavery has stolen her children away from her. In the first stanza, through a dramatic monologue, Equiano’s mother hazards a guess as to what might be happening to her son- “my seed”. She adds that:

They snared him like a beastly thing
Took him washed out in streams of fishy swam
Scaled and sold him, my flute song
Where his mother can never reach him

The slavers set traps to enable them capture the slaves and they were given identification marks by their owners. She believes her son might have been caught by traps set by the slavers. Equiano’s mother says “I will not be consoled” because she would not have sold or exchanged her son for anything.

**Part III: First trip to sunrise**
“Gesture”, in Part III, is a poem of reconciliation in the whole enterprise of (re) writing the history. The poet hopes that

AND THEN one day, brave
At last from survival, I shall
Come waving panics last

Gesture at this wrecked world
And my innocence shall return intact.

The earth that has been defiled will be pacified and the innocence of the victims will be established. After that, the poet announces:

I shall plant my feet among the ruins
To reap my souls riddled harvest
To straddle and survey the noble collapse of dreams
My future, my silence.

**CONCLUSION**

Opoku-Agyemang (1992) employs images of the “castle”, “sea”, “boats”, “vultures”, “shark”, “cargoes”, “waves” and “bones” to advance the need for (re)writing of the history of anguish, deceit and hypocrisy. Again, his words are accessible but not simplistic. His images, which are largely visual and auditory, raise his poetry beyond emotions and their artistic use enables him to (re)write the slave experience, and also allows the people to “journey through difficult straits (even if) in the end we may find only confusion” (Anyidoho, 1996). His forte is the conscious manipulation of the facts of the slave experience to create a tableau against which social values and attitudes can be evaluated. He brings out quite clearly the ways the history of the slave trade should be like. Consequently the readers are compelled to suspend their own partisan prejudices and to look at all the issues from a fresh and correspondingly neutral vantage position.

The slave experiences occupy a silenced space in the memory of the people. It is a history of silence. This silence, whose horror, guilt and shame haunt the people, must be broken. In his attempt to (re)write the history of the slave experiences, Opoku-Agyemang (1992) narrates stories of pain, trauma, betrayal and denial. His is to address the historical gap created in the slave narratives and to reconstruct them.

Indeed, “the creative writer assumes the fundamentally impracticable but necessary burden of accounting for history” (Opoku-Agyemang, 1992). But this account should be accurate and should contain the essential truth of society by “highlighting and then transcending the limits set by its fact” (Opoku-Agyemang, 1992). Therefore the way to reclaim our unspoken memories is to (re)write past verities. Opoku-Agyemang (1996) has expressed the history of slavery in Cape Coast Castle.

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