

THE PORTRAITURE OF STOCKHOLM SYNDROME: CULTURAL DISLOCATION IN PHILLIS WHEATLEY'S POETRY COLLECTION AND SELECTED AFRICAN AMERICAN TEXTS

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Abstract

One of the tropes that have often been glossed over in African American literature is the concept of Stockholm Syndrome. The syndrome emphasises irrationality and abnormal psychological or mental disposition of Stockholm Syndrome sufferers towards individuals responsible for their pitiable conditions. This article examines the conception and its nexus with slavery and the use of religion (Christianity) as an ideological tool for the indoctrination or brainwashing of African slaves and their descendants in the United States of America. I argue that the syndrome, though conceived as a correlate of Freudian ego-defence mechanism, operates like a psychedelic or hallucinogenic drug which, according to Karl Marx, dulls the reasoning capacity and cerebration of the sufferers and prevents them from thinking rationally. Besides, it alters their perception of reality forcing them to accept abnormality as normality in a bid to create an escapist route for their fears, hurt feelings and pent-up wounds.

Keywords: Stockholm Syndrome, African American literature, Phillis Wheatley, Transatlantic slavery, Ego-Defence Mechanism

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Lucy Christopher's 2009 thriller, *Stolen: Letter to My Captor*, ingeminates the perniciousness of abduction and, most importantly, the portraiture of Nils Bejerot's¹ neologism, "Stockholm Syndrome", in literature. Though written by a non-African American, the novel bears intertextuality with some of the poems in Phillis Wheatley's poetry collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1793), and some African American texts analysed in this article. Christopher's protagonist, Gemma – the victim of abduction in the novel – develops *love* for her abductor (Ty) whom she writes reflectively after regaining her freedom:

Let's face it, you did steal me. But you saved my life too. And somewhere in the middle, you showed me a place so different and beautiful; I can never get it out of my mind. And I can't get you out of there either. You're stuck in my brain like my own blood vessels. (Christopher, 2009)

Gemma clearly suffers from Stockholm Syndrome by having irrational *love* and emotional attachment, albeit short-lived, to her captor who kidnaps her at a Bangkok airport and brings her to a desert in Australia.

Since this article examines the concept of Stockholm Syndrome through the lens of African American literature, my analysis of the syndrome will be confined to texts written by African American writers, especially those that portray the evils of slavery in their works and its overarching effects on characters whose actions are interpreted as a corollary of their troubled past and a projection or release of their traumatic experiences. These experiences, therefore, make them susceptible to the syndrome. Consequently, the contrapuntal reading of Wheatley's *controversial* poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America"² (1768), and similar creative works by African American writers, brings to the fore the age-long knotty issue of race relation and other attendant problems or tensions generated by the racial taxonomy of humanity into the white, the black, and the yellow classifications. Wheatley has probably stirred the hornet's nest with her octave:

"Twas mercy brought me from *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

¹ Nils Bejerot is a top Swedish criminologist and researcher who coined the term, Stockholm Syndrome.

² It is one of the poems in her anthology.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
 "Their coulour is a diabolic die,"
 Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (15)

Critics such as Collins (1975), Ogunyemi (1976), and Gates (2003) view her oeuvre as an affront on the black race; while, to some, it is merely an attempt by a poor slave girl to appreciate the beauty of a newfound religion that welcomed her with open hands into the utopian Abrahamic faith. The poem, some critics would argue, appears innocuous, because it reads much like a riposte defending the humanity of blacks and their accessibility to redemption that Christianity promises.³ A slightly different interpretation to the poem is offered in this article. It counters other hermeneutics and queries the psychological condition of Wheatley at the time she wrote the poem. The hermeneutics is based on the following posers: what experiences birthed the poem? What did she see in Judeo-Christian God that made her denounce her indigenous African gods and deities? Is her case not that of religious brainwashing? Why is her poesy punctuated with *ethnophaulism* that further reifies the warped Eurocentric conception of Africa as a cultural space of savages? Considering her abduction in Africa at the age of seven, could this repressed experience be responsible for her cultural amnesia or dislocation and the inferiorisation of her Africanity?

A postmodernist critique of the poem helps to reveal the covert tensions and the complete brainwashing of a youngster who is made to see nothing good in African cultural patrimony, but to praise that of her captors. Her mindset only recognises Judeo-Christian God as the *ne plus ultra* and Christianity as the sole redemptive faith available to humanity. This mindset is against the postmodernist culture which believes that there is no absolute or universal truth, reason or knowledge. To describe the Jewish supreme deity as the sole redemptive agent is, therefore, an attempt to inferiorise pantheon of African gods believed by their devotees to be potent sources of healing, blessing and redemption. The possible explanation one may give to Wheatley's poem is that the youngster is a sufferer of Stockholm Syndrome. Her psyche appears to have been buffeted by slavery and the religion of her captors. Rather than developing an

³ As a matter of fact, Mani (2015) posits that the poem, and by extension, other poems in her collection, shows a "disapproval of slavery through her praise for religion, political commentaries, supporting elegies and death and finally through her escapism into an imaginary world" (p. 74).

ingrained hatred for the imposed foreign religion and culture, she falls in love with them, seeing them as sole redemptive forces. Her condition is mentally and physically that of mental abduction, hence the belief that the poet-persona may have developed irrational pathological love for the cultural and cosmology of her captors.

Stockholm Syndrome Defined

According to Nair (2015), Stockholm Syndrome is “a psychological phenomenon in which hostages express empathy, sympathy and positive feelings towards their captors sometimes to the point of defending and identifying with their captors. These feelings are generally considered in light of the danger or risk endured by the victims who essentially mistake a lack of abuse from their captors for an act of kindness” (p. 385). He equally identifies the intrinsic features of the conception to include: “positive feelings toward the abuser”, “negative feeling toward family, friends or authorities trying to rescue them”, “support of abusers’ reasons and behavior”, and “inability to engage in behavior that may assist in their release” (p. 386). Methuselah (2014) also defines the concept as “a paradoxical relationship between a captive and a captor in such a way that he/she is willing to help or protect the captor even from law enforcement agencies who might be on the trail of the captor to bring him/her to justice” (p. 53). Wade (2015), in his paper dedicated to Kristin Enmark,⁴ describes it as “both a cliché and an accepted ‘clinical’ reality, a received truth [that] reveals a style of theorising the oppressed, as submissive and deficient, as in need of instruction, correction, as participants in their own oppression”⁵. The syndrome, in essence, emphasises hostage taking situation in which the hostages develop irrational love, emotions and positive feelings towards their hostage-takers as a proof of appreciation for the modicum of kindness exhibited to them while the abduction lasts.

Applying the Stockholm Syndrome conception to Wheatley’s poem, in order to probe the workings of her mind, may help situate the poet as a sufferer of the syndrome. This is because there is a link between a writer’s perception of reality and the construction of that reality with a tapestry of language that uniquely explores their psychological conditions and the workings of their minds. Hicks (2004) confirms this

⁴ She is one of the victims of the 1973 Kreditbanken robbery at Norrmalmstrog, Stockholm, Sweden – an incident that gave birth to the neologism.

⁵ The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology defines it as “A psychological condition in which a hostage identifies with her/his captors and shows loyalty and affection toward them” (2009, p. 523).

when he writes that “our social reality is constructed by the language we use” (p. 4), and language use is a product of the user’s emotions, temperament and psychological conditions. Considering the restrictive and regressive effects of chattel slavery and the inhumanity that attended the ignoble subjection or relegation of humans to the position of beasts of burden, it is not out of place for the poet to have experienced mental abduction, sequel to her physical abduction from Africa. Most victims of slavery in the US can be said to have experienced a traumatic experience similar to the victims of hostage taking, rape, murder, and spousal or child abuse. What connects all the victims together can be put as psychological trauma occasioned by the precarious position they find themselves that leaves them at the receiving end of attacks, abuse, abduction or death.

To start with, most Africans shipped to American plantations were kidnapped before being sold into slavery. The stories of Olaudah Equiano who was stolen from Igboland in the present day Nigeria at the age of seven alongside his sister, and Phillis Wheatley who was stolen from an unknown West African community⁶ readily come to mind. Slavery dehumanises; it reduces humans to beasts of burden leaving them objectified or *thingified*. The evils of slavery and its despicability are portrayed by almost all the slave narratives and other books of slavery as a moral evil that defeated God’s purpose for humanity. The 92-year-old former slave, Henry James Trentham, in Belinda Hurmence’s, *My Folks Don’t Want me to Talk about Slavery* (1984), described slavery as “pretty rough, and I am glad it is all over” (p. 8). Similarly, in their slave narratives, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth paint the horror of slavery and the privation of slaves who toiled from morning till sunset on plantations. The privations suffered by slaves left them defenceless and helpless. The point being made is that slavery reduces human’s worth, and the mental agony it unleashes may serve as a similitude of mental torture suffered by victims of rape, incest, and abduction.

Is Stockholm Syndrome a Health Challenge?

It is difficult to declare that Stockholm Syndrome is a health challenge or not. While divergent opinions are bound to trail the conception of the phenomenon as a health or non-health issue, the psychological condition that predisposes a victim/sufferer of the syndrome to act contrary to the expected opinion makes the

⁶ G. J. Barker-Benfield and Catherine Clinton in *Portraits of African Women: From Settlement to the Present* write that she was a Fulani girl from Senegal, West Africa, and was born in 1753 and enslaved in 1761.

syndrome a likely health challenge. In his article, “Stockholm Syndrome – A Self Delusive Survival Strategy”, Nair (2015) describes the conception as a psychiatric or traumatic condition in which “patients are given anti-anxiety medication or other prescriptions to help them with their nervousness and anxiety” (p. 386). The condition, to Nair, is a health challenge because “people with Stockholm Syndrome report the same symptoms as those diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) [and] the symptoms are insomnia, nightmares, general irritability, difficulty in concentrating, being easily startled, feelings of unreality, inability to enjoy previously pleasurable experiences, distrust, flashbacks” (p. 386). PTSD is defined as “An anxiety disorder [that] ... occurs in people who have experienced life-threatening events to which they respond with feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. Examples of causal events include, but are not limited to, combat, childhood abuse, rape, other physical assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, and severe motor vehicle accidents”. (p. 394)⁷

The projection of repressed unconscious elements in the psyche and the categorisation of Stockholm Syndrome as belonging to the class of PTSD possibly confirms that the syndrome is a psychological condition triggered off by the involuntary recollection of hurts and wounds bottled up in the subconscious of the sufferer. If ranked alongside PTSD, it means that Stockholm Syndrome sufferers may be having an *illness* resulting from their repressed traumatic experiences or pains. This, therefore, makes the syndrome a serious challenge that deserves adequate attention in view of the fact that its manifestation is not limited to hostage taking situation alone, but also rears its head in “abused of children, battered/abused women, prisoners of war, cult members, incest victims, criminal hostage situations, concentration camp prisoners, controlling/intimidating relationships”.⁸

Stockholm Syndrome as a Correlate of Ego-Defence Mechanism

Many scholars see Stockholm Syndrome as a defence strategy devised by victims of abduction to escape their ordeal. In fact, Lucy Christopher foregrounds this well through the characterisation of Gemma who develops “soft” *love* for Ty, making the abductor believe that she loves him, though it is a decoy to make her escape from a desert in Australia. Freudian Defence Mechanism is “the process by which the contents

⁷ See: *The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*

⁸ See: Joseph M. Carver’s “Love and Stockholm Syndrome: The Mystery of Loving an Abuser”
<http://counsellingresource.com/lib/therapy/self-help/stockholm/>

of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious ... [or] the process by which we keep the repressed in order to avoid knowing what we feel we can't handle knowing" (Tyson, 2016, p. 15). Ewen (2003) also describes defences as a "method used by the ego to ward off threats from the id, superego, or external world, and to reduce the corresponding anxiety. Most defence mechanisms operate unconsciously, making possible the primary goal of self-deception" (p. 23). It is also "any of a number of strategies the ego employs to prevent the energy of an unfulfilled desire from disrupting its plans. It usually involves repression of the desire and a redirection of the energy" (p. 152)⁹. As "psychic procedures for avoiding painful admissions or recognitions" (Barry, 1995, p. 98), defence mechanisms are beneficial to man because they help him to forget those unpalatable experiences, hurts and wounds that may predispose him to unleash his wounds and frustrations on the society. Identification with the aggressor – which parallels Stockholm Syndrome – is one of the numerous ego-defence mechanisms often used by victims of abuse or people with traumatic experience to evade reality by attempting to become exactly like their abusers.¹⁰ Freud¹¹ (1966) describes the conception "as the mechanism of identification or introjection" (p. 113) in which a victim impersonates "the aggressor, [by] assuming his attributes or imitating his aggression ... [or a case in which] the child transforms himself from the person threatened into the person who makes the threat" (p. 113).

Laplanche & Pontalis (1973) further explain the concept as the "reversal of roles [in which] the aggressed turns aggressor" (p. 209). According to them, the concept, which is not originally part of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, is a:

"Defence mechanism identified and described by Anna Freud (1936) ... [in which an individual] faced with an external threat (typically represented by a criticism emanating from an authority), the subject identifies himself with his aggressor. He may do so either by appropriating the aggression itself, or else by physical or moral emulation of the aggressor, or again by adopting particular symbols of power by which the aggressor is designated. (p. 208)

Relating the defence mechanism to Stockholm Syndrome indicates role reversion or identification in which the abducted takes on the role of the abductor. This is clearly

⁹ See *Dictionary of Psychology*

¹⁰ Other ego-defense mechanisms include "denial", "repression", "sublimation", "projection", "regression", "displacement", "rationalisation", "intellectualisation", and many more.

¹¹ It is Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna, that is referred to here.

evinced in the 1974 celebrated case of Patty Hearst, who was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), only for her to join the army and participate in many robberies (Nair, 2015).

Portraiture of Stockholm Syndrome in African American Texts

Before identifying the elements of Stockholm Syndrome in Wheatley's anthology, it is important to consider the portraiture of the syndrome in other African American texts. This is to better foreground the claim that chattel slavery, as practised in the southern part of the United States of America, parallels hostage taking situation, or better constructs the oppressed-oppressor, bourgeois-proletariat, white-black binaries, and the racial animosity or inordinate quest for materialism that kept transatlantic slavery going for 400 years.

Apart from the prominence that Sojourner Truth's *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* enjoys as a slave narrative, the text is also believed to belong to the genre of "spiritual narratives" of African American literature considering the biblical thread links that bind the text together and its focus on stories of and about God (Ganzevoort, 2011) or scriptural stories that help to sermonise characters and redirect their frustrations to God who possesses solution to man's existential problems. Through Isabella who is also Sojourner Truth, she portrays the evils of slavery in America and its destructive effects on slaves who toiled day and night on plantations. One of such horrors is the forceful taking away and sale of Isabella's son from by her masters, despite the law forbidding the sale of slave out of the State of New York:

A little previous to Isabel's leaving her old master, he had sold her child, a boy of five years, to a Dr. Gedney, who took him with him as far as New York city, on his way to England; but finding the boy too small for his service, he sent him back to his brother, Solomon Gedney. This man disposed of him to his sister's husband, a wealthy planter, by the name of Fowler, who took him to his own home in Alabama. (p. 44)

Isabella's mother, Mau Mau Betty – a mother of about "ten or twelve children; though Sojourner is far from knowing the exact number of her brothers and sisters" (p. 12), too, has her children sold off by her masters, as a way to raise money for themselves. However, Isabella makes frantic efforts to take back her child, having been freed herself, though the boy who has been brainwashed by Fowler denies knowing

Isabella: "at sight of her the boy cried aloud, and regarded her as some terrible being, who was about to take him away from his kind and loving friend. He knelt, even, and begged them, with tears, not to take him away from his dear master, who had brought him from the dreadful South, and been so kind to him" (p. 52). Isabella's boy fits the description of a Stockholm Syndrome sufferer, though forced by his master to denounce his mother in court; just as slaves belonging to Colonel Lloyd and Jacob Jepson in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, similarly, fight over who is superior or richer between their masters – the same individuals who subject them to enslavement and inhumanity:

Indeed, it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of their masters, each contending for the superior goodness of his own over that of the others. At the very same time, they mutually execrate their masters when viewed separately. It was so on our plantation. When Colonel Llyod's slaves met the slaves of Jacob Jepson, they seldom parted without a quarrel about their masters; Colonel Llyod's slaves contending that he was the richest, and Mr. Jepson's slaves that he was the smartest, and most of a man. Colonel Llyod's slaves would boast his ability to buy and sell Jacob Jepson. Mr. Jepson's slaves would boast his ability to whip Colonel Llyod. These quarrels would almost always end in a fight between the parties ... They seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves. (p. 12)

In Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, grandma Harrie; her daughter, Annjee, and some old Negroes evince Stockholm Syndrome through their actions. The text portrays the post-slavery America, the ingrained race tensions and the gut-wrenching lifestyle of slaves in the northern part of the country. Despite their freedom, the former slaves continue to exist on the fringe of American society. Not minding the inhumanity meted out to the coloured people during and after slavery, grandma Harrie - who toils from the cradle to the grave – continues to defend white Americans and refers to them as good people. The love relationship between Annjee and Jimboy, too, bears the semblance of the conception, considering the fact that Annjee is a victim of unrequited love, because Jimboy often abandons her in search of greener pastures elsewhere. Despite being abandoned, Annjee keeps loving and defending his husband whom her mother detests for being a worldling and for his laziness. Through the

characterisation of grandma Harrie and some other old Negroes, white Americans are not wicked as often touted by many coloured people. Reflecting on the slavery period, grandma Harrie hints on the contradiction that shapes the modicum of kindness shown to slaves by the same people who keep them in bondage:

They talks 'bout slavery time an' they makes out now like it were de most awfullest time what ever was, but don't you believe it, chille, 'cause it weren't all that bad. Some o' de white folks was just as nice to their niggers as they could be, nicer than many of 'em is now, what makes 'em work for less than they needs to eat. An' in those days they had to feed 'em. An' they ain't every white man beat his slaves neither! Course I ain't sayin' 'twas no paradise, but I ain't going to say it were no hell either. (p. 126)

In a discussion with her daughters (Annjee and Harriet), her son-in-law (Jimboy), grandson (Sandy), and her neighbour (Sister Johnson) on the perception of whites in Stanton; Harrie notes that, "If you don't like 'em, pray for 'em, but don't feel evil against 'em. ... I been knowin' white folks all my life, an' they's good as far as they can see" (p.50). While narrating slavery story to Sandy, Harrie's statement clearly portrays the syndrome:

"Well, de freedom come, an' all de niggers scatter like buckshot, goin' to live in town. An' de yard niggers say I's a ole fool! I's free now – why don't I come with them? But I say no, I's gwine stay Miss Jeanne – an' I stayed. I 'lowed ain't nary one o' them colored folks needed me like Miss Jeanne did, so I ain't went with 'em" (p. 127).

As revealed in Harrie's narrative, some slaves weep bitterly seeing their white masters going to fight in the war between the North and South over the abolition of slavery and emancipation of slaves in the South:

I disremembers what year it were de war broke out, but white folks was scared, an' niggers, too. Didn't know what might happen. An' we heard talk o' Abraham Lincoln 'way down yonder in de South. An' de ole marster, olde man Winfield, took his gun an' went to war, an' de young son, too, an' de superintendent and de overseer – all of 'em gone to follow Lee. Ain't left nothin' but womens an' niggers on de plantation. De womens was a-cryin' an' de niggers was, too, 'cause they was sorry fo' de po' grievin' white folks. (p. 127)

Harie's first daughter, Tempty, and her husband, Mr. Siles, possibly suffer from the syndrome, even though the postcolonial model of "mimicry" – the parody of the oppressor's values, assumptions, lifestyles and beliefs – also describes their snobbish

attitude. They look down on blacks and refuse to associate with them. They describe their own people as uneducated and too religious, because they (Tempty and Mr. Siles) are educated. Tempty's extrapolated experiences of serving a white lady as a personal maid manifest in her ignoble attitude towards blacks in Stanton, ditto for Mr. Siles. Having been impressed by her services and loyalty, the white woman wills a house to her. According to the narrator in Hughes' text, Tempty and her husband hate blues and spirituals "because they were too negro" (p. 171), besides they believe that:

Colored people certainly needed to come up in the world ... up to the level of white people – Dress like white people, talk like white people, think like white people – and then they would no longer be called "niggers".

In Tempty this feeling was an emotional reaction, born of white admiration, but in Mr. Siles, who shared his wife's views, the same attitude was born out of practical thought. The whites had the money, and if Negroes wanted any, the quicker they learned to be like the whites, the better. Stop being lazy, stop singing all the time, stop attending revivals, and learn to get the dollar – because money buys everything, even the respect of white people. (p. 171)

The poet-persona in Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" also suffers from Stockholm Syndrome believing that her abduction has done her a lot of good. To the persona, remaining in Africa will have shut the door of salvation to her, where she remains bound to the African heathenish beliefs and its animist cosmology. Her first four lines, "'Twas mercy brought me from Pagan land,/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:/Once I redemption neither sought nor knew", seem to reinforce the mental state of a Stockholm Syndrome sufferer who defends the belief and faith of her captors, closing her eye to the despicable act of her abduction in the first place, and not minding the fact that the abductors or enslavers are the same hypocritical evangelists who convert her to Christianity. In her elegy, "On the Death of the Rev. Dr. Sewell, 1769", Wheatley laments the loss of a Rev. Dr. Sewell, who possibly was a slaveholder or one of the top shots controlling the 18th century Boston slave economy. Her religious indoctrination or brainwashing prevents her from seeing the *abjected* space she occupies in the American society, and rather than reflecting and projecting in her poetry the mercantilism and

devilry of bourgeois white Americans that degraded her humanity, she is lost in the praise or lamenting the loss of her captors:

Ere yet morn its lovely blushes spread
See *Sewell* number'd with the happy dead.
Hail, holy man, arriv'd th' immortal shore,
Though we shall hear thy warning voice no more.
Come, let us all behold with wishful eyes
The saint ascending to his native skies;
From hence the prophet wing'd his rapt'rous way
To the blest mansions in eternal day. (pp. 15-16)

Though Shields (1988) writes that Rev. Dr. Sewell or Sewall was the “son a diarist and Chief Justice Samuel Sewall (who also wrote one of the earliest antislavery tracts in the colonies, ‘The Selling of Joseph’, in 1700), [and] was a principal minister of the famous Old South Church of Boston, which the Wheatley family attended” (p. 281), the cleric is seen as being culpable in the enslavement of Africans in America, since he may have benefitted indirectly from slavery. Though he may not have homologated slavery, the way Pope Nicholas V (1397-1455) in his Papal Bull or the Doctrine of Discovery (1452)¹² did. It is submitted that the cleric may have benefitted from the enslavement of blacks in the US, because his salary must have been paid by members of his congregation comprising mainly Boston slaveholders.

In “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England”, Wheatley blatantly commits what Wertheimer (2006), calls “an important semiotic slip ‘between religious escape and racial denial of the self.’” (p. 66)¹³ by referring to (Africa) as a “land of errors”, “Egyptian gloom”, “dark abodes”:

WHILE an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptain gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand

¹² Pope Nicholas V directed the Portuguese King, Alfonso V, to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever ... [and] reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit” (Davenport & Paullin, 2004, p. 23).

¹³ Eric Wertheimer (2006) cites Terrence Collins (1975).

Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
 Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
 And mark the systems of revolving worlds.
 Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
 The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,
 How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows. (p. 13)

In defence of Wheatley, Baker-Benfield and Clinton (1988) believe that the slave girl does not intend to portray Africa as a space with "happy primitives; it is an African without Christianity and without civilization. Although this portrait is flattering to her native land, it is rhetorically useful; it creates an ironic contrast between her lot and that of the Harvard students. The latter are Christians by birth, and because they have the privileges of class, they are offered a knowledge of the highest civilization that human beings have attained. Yet they are abusing this God-given gift, one that has been denied to members of Phillis Wheatley's race. A lowly African must remind them that they too, like all people, may be destroyed by sin" (p. 112). Their interpretation is an alibi intended to extenuate Wheatley's racial denial and self-abnegation, since she does not see any African as *honnête home*, but as backward uncivilised brute.

Despite being a black writer, her poetry is punctuated by dysphemism or possibly *ethnophaulism* that portrays "Africa" as a *toponymy* of backwardness. Her psyche, which has been conditioned to see white as good and black as evil, is a correlate of the mindset of European supremacists and their African collaborators who never see anything worthwhile in Africa and its people. The African collaborators of white supremacist ideology are the people that Appiah (1991) calls the *comprador intelligentsia*, that is, "a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa" (p. 348).

Interestingly, Appiah's *comprador intelligentsia* could as well be described as sufferers of Stockholm Syndrome considering the fact that they mimic the West

ignorantly and throw away their cultural patrimony. No wonder Uroh (2008) believes that such people are victims of *cultural dislocation* – “a forceful disorientation or delinking of a people from their collective heritage in the arts, sciences, political and social organizations, social norms, religious belief systems, linguistic usage” (p. 129). In the case of African collaborators of European supremacy, their cultural dislocation is not forceful but deliberate. They evince Langston Hughes’ *jeu d’esprit* calling for outright mimicry of whites by blacks in all ramifications in order for them to break out of poverty and underdevelopment. However, Phillis Wheatley’s cultural dislocation is both forceful and deliberate. It is forceful because transatlantic slavery uprooted her from Africa; it is, however, deliberate since she allows the permanent conditioning of her mind in the direction of praise singing her captors for removing her from a *toponymy* of darkness and backwardness – that shows her as a sufferer of Stockholm Syndrome, just like slave characters in most of the works examined. Gates (2003) writes that the reason why Phillis Wheatley is unpopular and why her poetry did not receive adequate attention it deserves among black Americans is due to the unnecessary praise singing of slaveholders and people that Césaire (1955) calls “the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, [propelled by their] appetite ... [and] ... the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies” (p. 2).

While commenting specifically on the poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, Gates (2003) submits that the poem “has been the most reviled poem in African-American literature. To speak in such glowing terms about ‘mercy’ manifested by the slave trade was not exactly going to endear Miss Wheatley to black power advocates in the 1960s” (p. 71). Collins (1975) also believes that “Wheatley’s true legacy is the testimony her poetry gives to the insidious, self-destroying nature of even the most subtle, most gentle of racially oppressive conditions” (p. 88), just as Ogunyemi (1976) submits that through her poems she displays “a complete lack of feeling and involvement on her part as a writer – all attributes of a neo-classical writer” (p. 17). Despite being regarded as “the first prominent Black writer in the United States to publish a book of imaginative writing. She is also the first to start the African-American literary tradition, as well as the African-American women literary tradition” (Mani,

2015, p. 74), many scholars in Black cultural study still see her as a perfect example of cultural dislocation and one of those Africans or African Americans who project negative image of their race to the rest of the world. My argument in this article is, therefore, not to see her in this light alone, otherwise the hermeneutics of her person will be narrow and restricted. Wheatley should rather be seen as a victim of Stockholm Syndrome who was not in possession of her psyche when she wrote her poems, because slavery had greatly impacted the mind (Wertheimer, 2006) that she suddenly developed hatred for her own culture, but irrationally loved what did not belong to her. She may have written the poems to please her enslavers and use them as a defence strategy to escape enslavement. To please her enslavers, she must identify with them and look down on her indigenous culture and people – that is Stockholm Syndrome at work in her.

Christianity and Subjection of Slaves to Stockholm Syndrome

The transatlantic slave trade is believed to have led to the uprooting of a number of Africans to the Americas and it operated for 400 years (Mani, 2015). Walvin (2007) also posits that nothing less than 27,000 voyages were made by slave ships between Africa, Europe and the Americas as European slave merchants¹⁴ navigated African coasts in triangular trade that stalled the development of Africa in many ways. Apart from the use of force and wanton dehumanisation of slaves who were left toiling on plantations in the Americas, religion (Christianity) was used by the enslavers as a tool to benumb the minds of the enslaved and ensure their perpetual enslavement. Religion has always been one of the state apparatuses in a capitalist economy or one of its non-coercive ideological agencies (Tyson, 1999) often used “to chain or imprison the consciousness of the oppressed working class” (Adeniyi, 2017, p. 58). Louis Althusser defines “repressive structures” or “ideological apparatuses” as “institutions like the law courts, prisons, the police force, and the army, which operate ... by external force ... groupings as political parties, schools, the media, churches, the family, and art ... [that]

¹⁴ Portuguese were said to have started the trade with the capture of 12 slaves in 1441 by Antam Gonçalves from the coast of Africa and brought them to Prince Henry of Portugal. The trade, considering its economic prospects, was later approved by the Pope, as Gonçalves was encouraged to go for more raids. See Mani, 2015.

foster an ideology – a set of ideas and attitudes – which is sympathetic to the aims of the state and the political status quo” (p. 61).¹⁵

It is argued in this article that Christianity is used by slaveholders and white population after abolition of slavery as a weapon to subjugate blacks. Their subjugation, therefore, makes them susceptible to Stockholm Syndrome. In other words, Christianity is a weapon mostly used to benumb and deprive the oppressed the ability to reason and reflect on their *abjected* condition. The religion operates surreptitiously to achieve this aim as it enables the oppressed to remove their minds from their earthly ordeals and channel their wounds, frustrations to God whose promise of utopian eschatological hereafter will replace their present ordeals. This is why Karl Marx posits that “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people”.¹⁶ In his explanation of what Karl Marx means by equating religion to hallucinogenic drugs, Igboin (2014) notes that “he critiqued religion as an analgesic that dulls the senses, thus inducing a false sense of satisfaction, and preventing the oppressed from revolting against the grubby socio-economic system. As the sigh of the oppressed, religion makes them resign to fate since it only gives an unrealistic eschatological hope” (p. 1).

In African American literature, the preponderance of religion as a defining leitmotif is phenomenal. Most of the slaves were made to believe that it was their lot to obey and conduct themselves orderly before their enslaving masters. They quote Biblical verses that preach obedience to the authority, and indoctrinated the slaves making them believe that their slavery was godly. Corroborating this view through Wheatley’s oeuvre, Mani (2015) writes that:

one glance at her poems will tell readers how well Christianity has been used as a tool to brainwash the slaves brought from Africa to accept their misfortune as slaves ...

¹⁵ Also contained in Adeniyi’s “Bourgeois Tensions, Marxist Economics and Aphaeresis of Communal Spirit in Sembene Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood* and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross*” (2017).

¹⁶ See the article “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. Igboin (2014), however, believes otherwise, stating that the Marxian view of religion is “prismatic” (p.1), and rather than being used by the oppressors to suppress the rebellious instincts in man, it should better be conceived as “an amphetamine or a catalyst for revolt [or] an energizing pill, to pursue other goals” (p.1).

Due to the exposure to Christianity, she has grown up thinking that Blacks were a cursed lot. She uses the biblical knowledge taught to her by her master, to relate the Blacks with the cruel son of Adam, Cain, who kills his own brother, Abel out of jealousy. From that incident, Cain was cursed by the Lord to shoulder his sins without salvation. This poem conveys a deep meaning to her race. She urges them to accept their fate as slaves and turn to religion for salvation. She states that although they are viewed as a cursed race, they can still attain freedom through religion in their afterlife. (p. 76)

With the exception of Frederick Douglass, other foremost African American writers portray the religiosity of blacks during slavery period and post-slavery America. Sojourner Truth, for example, is taught by her enslaved mother, Mau Mau Betty, to trust in God and always obey her masters. Langston Hughes also provides the portraiture of a people who are still enslaved by religious ideology in post-slavery America as they go about singing spirituals and attending church programmes unendingly. Douglass believes that American Christianity is different from the Christianity of Jesus. He believes that Christianity is fraught with many unresolvable errors and contradictions; besides, it is pretentious. According to him, the Christianity of Americans is a "slaveholding religion" (p. 71), because:

We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me (pp. 71-72).

The foregoing excerpt expresses the dilemma of Christianity in America. Rather than being the religion that seeks renewal of soul and draws man closer to God, irrespective of race, sex and educational status; the faith, as practised in America, is filled with "horrible inconsistencies" (Douglass, 1995, p. 71). One of the inconsistencies is the enslavement and wanton killings of blacks by white Americans who misinterpret the religion and adopt it as an excuse to privilege the white race and inferiorise black

Americans – who in their collective unconscious are archetypes of impoverishment. Blacks to them are merely hewers of wood and drawers of water, and exist on the periphery of American Dream.

Conclusion

This article has examined the evils of transatlantic slavery in the United States of America. It argues that slavery reduces human worth and subjects humans to untold hardship. It believes that Stockholm Syndrome is a defence strategy used by the enslaved and their descendants to escape the pains of slavery and post slavery American racial tensions. Slavery subjugated them; the enslavers further used Christianity (religion) as an ideological weapon to imprison the minds of the enslaved and prevent them from reasoning by making them accept abnormalities as normality. While some of them developed irrational love and emotional attachment for their enslavers – the way victims of abduction sometimes do for their captors, others accept the religious ideologies, culture and language of their enslavers as the model to define themselves and express their identity. They also do so to the detriment of their own indigenous cultural practices.

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