

THE EMBODIMENT OF THE BLACK FEMINIST SPIRIT IN IOLA LEROY, THE FEMALE MULATTO PROTAGONIST, IN FRANCES HARPER'S *IOLA LEROY*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze how the female protagonist in Harper's novel entitled *Iola Leroy*, although a mulatto, embodies the spirit of black feminism. To carry out the analysis, feminist literary criticism is used as the frame of analysis linked with gynocriticism. Several concepts concerning black feminism including empowerment, solidarity and sisterhood are used to support the frame of analysis. The result shows that the female mulatto protagonist, who does not know that she has black blood, all of a sudden experiences real slavery. This harsh turning point on her previously comfortable life leads to her new insight about slavery, about her race, and about her personal existence as a woman. The last point results not only in the emergence of the spirit of black feminism but also in the application of this spirit to other blacks, especially the black women. The convergence of thought and action makes the female mulatto protagonist turns out from the victim of slavery into the agent of change for the black race.

Keywords: mulatto, black feminism, empowerment, slavery

Introduction

Frances Harper's (1825-1911) novel entitled *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) is about its female mulatto protagonist, Iola Leroy, who suddenly experiences slavery after the deliberate concealment of her black heritage by her white father is countered legally by her father's male white cousin soon after the sudden death of her father. The turning point of her life makes Iola has a new personal view on slavery which eventually leads her to struggle for the betterment of the black race especially of the black women. This paper will argue that although Iola herself is a mulatto having a chance to pass into white, her personal thoughts and her actions personally or collaboratively with the others, male or female blacks and mulattoes, embody the spirit of black feminism.

Bearing in mind that the setting of Harper's *Iola Leroy* is mostly in the South before and after the Civil War, some important elements during that period are briefly presented. The first one is a specific

rule for the blacks in the South, called "one-drop rule" in which "a single drop of "black blood" makes a person a black" (Davies, Excerpt par. 1). However, this racist rule, on the other side "galvanized the black community" (Wright, 1994: par. 16).

Another racist rule is called "Jim Crow" which segregate the black and white people in "restaurants, hotels, theaters, bus stations,..." (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroom>

[materials/primarysourcesets/civil-rights/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/civil-rights/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf) accessed July 13, 2015). Due to these racist rules, after the Civil War many blacks moved to the North but they "discover that they faced discrimination in the northern states" (http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/sets/Primary_Source_Set--Jim_Crow_in_America.pdf accessed July 13, 2015).

Another characteristic of that time is called "the Cult of True Womanhood" in which respectable women should "have four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter, 1966, p. 1). However, this rule is only for

the white women since “In the eyes of the 19th century white public, the black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere chattel, a thing, an animal” (hooks, 1992, p. 159). The female mulatto protagonist of Harper’s *Iola Leroy* who is first seen as a high-class white woman and later as a black slave experiences these two extreme ideologies.

According to hooks, a black feminist and theorist, “Feminists are made, not born” (2000, p. 7) in which “to be “feminist” ... is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression” (hooks, 1992, p. 195). In line with hooks, Nickie Charles emphasizes “a shift from a view of women as victims (of social structure as well as of men) to seeing women as active agents” (Charles, 1996, p. 23). Meanwhile, Sapiro states that feminist ideas usually proposed by those who have high social class (1986, p. 425).

Collins emphasizes “the importance of self-definition in resisting oppression” (Collins, 1991, p. 16) which agrees with hooks’ statement that “black women can renew our commitment to black liberation struggle, sharing insights and awareness, sharing feminist thinking and feminist vision, building solidarity” (1990, p. 49). Some elements supporting black feminism are solidarity, sisterhood, and empowerment. According to hooks “Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle” (hooks, 1984, p. 44). Meanwhile, Dill explains sisterhood as “a nurturant, supportive feeling of attachment and loyalty to other women which grows out of a shared experience of oppression” (Dill, 1995, p. 278). hooks concludes that “Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes” (hooks, 2000, p. 15).

Empowerment, according to Oxaal and Baden, is “essentially a bottom-up process ... Women must empower themselves” (1997, p. 6). They propose four kinds of power: “power over, power to,

power with, and power within” (Oxaal and Baden, 1997, p. 5). In relation to empowerment, Sophie proposes “four aspects of empowerment”; they are “Assets (power to); Knowledge and know-how (power to); Will (internal power); Capacity (internal power and power with)” (2007, p. 13). “Power to” is avoided by feminists because they prefer not to use conflicts which are counter-productive to the betterment of the blacks especially black women.

Methodology

Considering that the topic of analysis of this paper is about the female protagonist, the frame of analysis used is feminist criticism which “reads writing and examines its ideology and culture with a woman-centred perspective” (Humm, 1995, p. 51). Meanwhile, since the writer is a woman, then this analysis is also a gynocritics which “is concerned with *woman as writer*” (Showalter, 1986, p. 172). Gynocritics is used to help analyzing the writer’s purpose of constructing a specific female character from the perspective of a female writer. The analysis is a library research using contextual analysis which borrows theories from outside the field of literature and its intrinsic elements (<http://www.unl.edu/english/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html> accessed February 17, 2014).

Finding and Discussion

1. A Brief Glance of Iola’s Social Background

Iola Leroy, the protagonist of Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, is one of the three children of a Creole father, Eugene Leroy, who is a plantation owner in Mississippi, and Marie, a mulatto woman used to be Leroy’s slave. She has a brother, Harry Leroy, and a younger sister, Gracie Leroy. The three Leroy’s children have very light skin that they can be easily identified as whites for those who do not know the presence of their black blood.

Around twenty years before the Civil War, Eugene Leroy, a tender and loving man, falls in love with Mary who tenderly takes care of him when he was seriously ill and nobody pays attention to him. He legally marries Marie but before that he "... take her North, manumit, educate" her (71). He is different from other plantation and slave owners. He "did not believe in the rightfulness of the institution" (86). However, he realizes that society in the South thinks that "his marriage the great mistake of his life" (76).

Iola's parents live happily although being avoided by other whites. The father who is "especially careful to conceal from his children the knowledge of their connection with the negro race" (82) asks his wife to "let them go North, learn all they can, aspire all they may" (83). Thus, Iola and Harry study in the North and their parents occasionally spend time with them in the North to prevent them from going home in the South.

If Iola's father treats his slaves well and "was in favor of gradual emancipation" (86), Iola's mulatto mother thinks that "Neither wealth nor education can repair the wrong of a dishonored birth ..." (78). She also thinks about other slaves who are not as fortunate as herself (80). Iola's mother cannot shake the anxious feeling about her own existence and the existence of her children if something happened to the sole protector of the family, that is, Eugene Leroy, the loving husband and father. She is aware that Leroy's cousin, Alfred Lorraine, is a true racist and opposes strongly Eugene Leroy's marrying legally his ex slave. Marie's anxiousness is finally uttered to her husband: "the children and I might be reduced to slavery ... Your cousin was bitterly opposed to our marriage" (80-81). This premonition is not just sentimentality on the part of Marie, but due to being smart and critical, she fully realizes the vulnerable position of the mulattoes in the South at the time of slavery.

2. The Mulatto Iola's Spirit of Black Feminism

Iola's happy and comfortable life as the daughter of a wealthy Southern plantation and slave owner has to end abruptly near the end of her graduation from the prestigious school in the North. This part will analyze Iola's changing perspective and opinion concerning slavery and her own existence.

3. Towards Her Race

While she is still studying in the North, Iola does not take sides with the colored. Iola defends slavery in front of her northerner friends: "Slavery can't be wrong ... for my father is a slave-holder, ..." (97). However, her alignment on slavery is shattered after the sudden death of the father due to yellow fever (93). Tricked by her father's cousin, Alfred Lorraine, to return home, Iola has to face the unimaginable fact from her crestfallen mother: "I have negro blood in my veins. I was your father's slave before I married him ... The courts have declared our marriage null and void and my manumission illegal, and we are all to be remanded to slavery" (105). Since then, Iola's life is turned upside down, from the free, educated, known-to-be-white girl she becomes a mulatto slave, a chattel liable to be sold.

After changing masters several times, Iola's is saved by the Union army during the Civil War owing to the information given by a male slave who wants to protect Iola from the cruel master (39). She becomes a nurse in the field hospital. Her harsh personal experience triggers her purpose in life, as indicated by her words to Dr. Gresham "I intend, when this conflict is over, to cast my lot with the freed people as a helper, teacher, and friend" (114). From the decisive words it can be said that Iola, the female mulatto, consciously identifies herself as black and she wants to empower the black race by applying the "power with".

Iola's firm sidedness with the black race makes her able to see critically the relation of white and black: "I was abased, but the men who trampled on me were the degraded ones" (115). Iola points out that white people are not as noble as they think, even they are lesser in character. Iola also points out the cowardice of the "power over" executes by the white people "you only use your superior ability to victimize feebler races" (116) in her critical conversation with Dr. Gresham. Her decisive words to Dr. Gresham clearly indicate Iola's strong determination to be with the black race "I intend spending my future among the colored people of the South ... I must serve the race which needs me most" (234, 235). Thus, it can be said that Iola determines to struggle with the blacks for the better future of the black race.

4. Towards Her Own Existence

After her ruthless personal degradation, Iola has a new perspective about her own life. Personally, she decides that "she had never for a moment thought of giving or receiving love from one of that race who had been so lately associated in her mind with horror, aversion, and disgust" (111). This decision emerges when Dr. Gresham, a white man, shows certain interest to her. Iola tells Dr. Gresham that she does not belong to the white race "Instead of coming into this hospital a self-sacrificing woman ... I came as a rescued slave" (113). Still he proposes to marry her but Iola can detect that he is not prepared with the consequence of having a child with the possible trace of the negro blood (117). Although actually Iola also has certain feeling to him, she politely refuses his offer. Iola, who is proud of her black heritage, says with dignity that, "I have too much self-respect ... and I would never enter a family where I would be an unwelcome member" (117). Iola shows strong independency in determining her own life even though she can be said to have nothing in the world.

Iola's another personal decision concerning her life is that "I have resolved never to marry until I have found my mother" (118). This shows that Iola is not an egoistic person who cares for her own happiness and safety. Family is important for her. After the Civil War, while looking for her mother by advertising in newspapers (143), Iola decides to "offering myself as a teacher in one of the schools which are being opened in different parts of the country" (142). She confides her plan to Robert Johnson, a mulatto man, whom she nurses in the field hospital during the Civil War. Her critical opinion concerning slavery is also expressed to him, her only friend. She rejects any form of slavery for the blacks "My father and mother were very kind to their slaves. But it was slavery, all the same, and I hate it, root and branch" (149). Being alone and a female, Iola is unwavering in her decision to find her family, her brother and mother, since her little sister dies soon after they are given the status of slaves.

A happy reunion of the Leroy's family soon happens. Iola who often visits church gatherings to find information concerning her mother accidentally meets Harry who is also looking for her (195). Before that Harry has accidentally meets his mother in the hospital while he is seriously wounded in the Civil War (191). This happy reunion is multiplied by the fact that Robert Johnson, Iola's only friend, is the brother of Iola's mothers (201). Thus, Robert Johnson, Iola's uncle, who has found her mother who is also the mother of Iola's mother, asks them all to live with him in the North (203) so that they can enjoy the togetherness after the chaos in their lives.

Eventhough they have lived happily and face no financial problems, Iola wants to work to earn her own living. She tells her uncle "I have a theory that every woman ought to know how to earn living" (205). Iola's decision indicates that she wants to develop the "power within" so that she can possess good self-esteem. It also indicates that she breaks in the cult of true

womanhood emphasizing the domesticity for women. It also indicates that Iola has an advanced vision for women to be independent in their life. Iola's spirit of black feminism begins to emanate.

However, even in the North, Iola still faces racism at work. She loses two jobs because she does not want to hide her racial identity (206-207). Losing two jobs because of racism makes Iola momentarily feel disheartened as can be seen from her words to her uncle "It seems as if the prejudice pursues us through every avenue of life, and assigns us the lowest places" (207). However, Iola still determines to overcome the racial barrier at work without concealing her racial identity because "I am not ashamed of it" (208). Iola's racial pride is very obvious. Finally she gets a job in a firm out of town although she is refused to live in house "conducted by professed Christian women" (209) after she tells them her racial identity. All these incidents show that racism permeates everywhere and affects even religious people.

Iola still thinks that she should work for the progress of the black race. She often has critical discussion about the future of the black race with her uncle, her mother, Dr. Gresham, and Dr. Latimer, Dr. Gresham's friend. Iola's metaphor for slavery is "Slavery ... was a fearful cancer eating into the nation's heart, sapping its vitality, and undermining its life" (216). According to Iola, the basic solution of slavery is the correct interpretation and application of religion (216) so that Iola prefers to avoid conflict in her idea of a better future and better place for the black race. In other words, Iola keeps off any conflict inherent in "power over". Widening her intellectual circle for the sake of the black race, Iola is active in *conversazione* (243), a kind of scholarly social gatherings attended by many black intellectuals, males and females. Iola also presents a paper entitled "Education of Mothers" at the *conversazione* (253) which shows that Iola is developing the "power with" in which

she prepares the empowerment of the black women by joining an intellectual circle.

During these hectic days of intellectual meetings and discussions, Iola is getting closer to Dr. Latimer. Iola's admiration to Dr. Latimer's bright idea for the black race is heightened by the fact that Dr. Latimer refuses to pass as white even though it gives him not only wealth and fame, but also high-class white family circle (266). Iola confides to Dr. Latimer that the brutal turning point in her life has "roused all the resistance of my soul" (274) that enables her to pass it without losing her mind due to its atrocity. Thus, Iola has been able to transform miseries and misfortunes into useful form of power; namely "power within" leading to "power with" for the sake of herself and the black race. In other words, Iola has changed from a victim of slavery into an active agent of change with feminist ideas for the black race as will be further analyzed in the next discussion.

5. Towards Other Blacks Especially Black Women

Iola greatly supports Miss Delany, a young black woman, who works as a teacher and opens a school for the blacks (200). After Iola and Dr. Latimer get married, both of them continue their ceaseless effort to promote the life of the blacks. Iola herself is loved by everyone and the house is open for everyone "Little children love her. Old age turn to her for comfort, young girls for guidance, and mothers for counsel. Her life is full of blessedness" (270). In accordance with her personal commitment, Iola develops empowerment, solidarity, and sisterhood in every form. She applies the "power to" form of empowerment. Dr. Latimer, as his wife, is a helpful leader (279). He dreams of having a harmonious relationship among blacks and whites everywhere.

Thus, this young couple, Iola and Dr. Latimer, completes each other, empowers each in their struggles for the betterment of the black race and race relations. Their purpose in life is greatly

supported by their relatives. Harry, Iola's brother, and his wife, Lucille Delany, administer a promising school for the blacks (280). Iola's mother and uncle help the blacks in their own ways. However, all of them commit to one purpose; that is, the "racial uplift" for the black race.

6. The Writer's Purpose of Creating the Female Mulatto Protagonist with the Spirit of Black Feminism

In creating a certain imaginary protagonist, a fiction writer consciously or unconsciously has a certain purpose. By making her female mulatto chooses not to pass as white Harper is against the literary trend at that time about selfish female mulatto protagonists who prefer to pass as white for better status, wealth, and assuredness. By making her female mulatto clutches tightly on her black heritage, Harper propagates the racial pride among the blacks. By making her female mulatto has a decisive purpose in her life and succeeds in realizing her goal, Harper diverges from the stereotype of weak and tragic mulatto common in literary works. Harper indicates that a mulatto who is stereotyped as internally torn between two cultures, black and white cultures, can avoid the calamities by having a life goal. By making her female mulatto becomes an agent of change for the black race, Harper wants to indicate that the privileges possessed by mulattoes can be used as an asset to boost the progress of the black race. By making her female mulatto has high education and a mind open and critical for changes, Harper indicates that female mulattoes are not just a representation of deadly beauty as in the literary stereotype of "femme fatale". By making her female mulatto exerts the spirit of black feminism, Harper breaks in the convention that the spirit of black feminism is usually proposed by blacks since it is usually the black females who experience many forms of injustice because of her blackness.

Thus in *Iola Leroy*, Harper inserts a novelty in the stereotype of female mulatto

by attributing her female mulatto protagonist with non-stereotyped characteristics. Refusing to pass as white, becoming an agent of change for the black race, having a clear goal in life, applying the spirit of black feminism, are the newness added by Harper. It makes Iola a different and unforgettable female mulatto protagonist among other female mulatto protagonists by other writers.

Conclusions

Slavery and its accomplice called "one-drop rule" are the sources of countless unimaginable miseries to the blacks or those light-skinned people with one-drop of black blood in their veins. The tragic turn of life that casts free mulattoes into victims of slavery may not just make the victims accept hopeless lives. Iola in Harper's *Iola Leroy* has attested the agency of a female mulatto used to be the victim of slavery.

A legacy of struggle in the form of resisting spirit to the racial humiliation serves as the foundation to struggle. Embodying the spirit of black feminism, the path taken to uplift personal existence is through "power within", while for the betterment of the race is through "power to" in the form of various applications of solidarity, and sisterhood. The "power with" is realized by welding any worthwhile elements, such as intellectual circle, familial support, religious faith, and strong personal will. Thus by interlacing all those power while excluding "power over" which is potential for conflict and humiliation, the peaceful and productive struggle for the progress of the race, male and female, is realized step by step. Iola in Harper's *Iola Leroy* has embodied and actualized all of those successfully.

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