

Ecopoetics of Oppression in Selected Poems by Rita Dove

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Abstract:

Rita Dove is one of the most prominent African American poets. Her genuine works have attracted critics and readers' attention since the 1980s. Throughout her long career life, Dove's poetry covers a wide spectrum of topics pertaining to her attitude as a global citizen. This article particularly studies a selection of poems tackling the theme of oppression. It will explain how Dove employs nature in these poems to depict oppression from an ecopoetic lens. It will also identify how the poet utilizes both abstract and concrete as well as natural and unnatural ecopoetics to convey how black slaves and subjugated Haitian migrants experienced oppression in the selected poems. The article will rely on Tom Bristow and Sarah Nolan's definitions of ecopoetics and unnatural ecopoetics respectively to illustrate the inseparability between nature, man and culture.

Keywords:

Rita Dove, ecopoetics, unnatural ecopoetics, oppression, Tom Bristow, Sarah Nolan

ملخص البحث باللغة العربية:

ريتا دوف واحدة من أهم الشعراء الأميركيين الأفارقة، فأعمالها الأصيلة جذبت انتباه النقاد والقراء منذ ثمانينات القرن العشرين، ويغطي شعرها نطاقا واسعا من الموضوعات المرتبطة بموقفها كإنسانة عالمية النزعة طوال مسيرتها المهنية الممتدة. يدرس هذا المقال بشكل خاص مجموعة من القصائد التي تتناول فكرة الاضطهاد، وسوف يفسر كيف توظف دوف الطبيعة في هذه القصائد لتصور الاضطهاد من منظور شعري بيئي،

كما أن المقال سيحدد كيف تستخدم الشاعرة عناصر الشعر البيئي الطبيعية وغير الطبيعية وأيضا المادية والمعنوية لإيصال كيف شعر العبيد السود والمهاجرين المقهورين من دولة هيتي بالاضطهاد في القصائد المختارة، وسوف يعتمد المقال تعاريف الشعر البيئي وشعر البيئة غير الطبيعية لكل من توم بريستو وسارة نولان على الترتيب لتوضيح استحالة الفصل بين الطبيعية والإنسان والثقافة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

ريتا دوف – الشعر البيئي – شعر البيئة غير الطبيعية – الاضطهاد - توم بريستو- سارة نولان.

Introduction

Rita Dove was the first African American and youngest poet ever to hold the post of American Poet Laureate from 1993 to 1995 and the second Pulitzer winning African American writer. She was awarded twenty eight honorary doctorates from different academic institutions including Harvard and Yale. Critics recognized her poetic talent from the first published collection *The Yellow House on the Corner* in 1980. She also wrote nine poetry collections, the most famous of which is *Thomas and Beulah* in 1986. Additionally, she authored *Through the Ivory Gate*, a novel, *the Darker Face of the Earth*, a play, and *Fifth Sunday*, a short story collection.

Many critics have written about Rita Dove's works but the majority of their studies focus on issues related to Afro-American literature, black ethnicity and feminism. For example, critics find that these issues are tackled in many works. However, most of them agree that the poet does not introduce herself as an African-American or a feminist poet. Rather, she is eager to be categorized as a global citizen. Unlike many African American and feminist writers, she transcends gen and ethnicity and develops a voice of a poet who aspires to contribute to the main canon of American poetry. When she raises issues of concern to African American, women...etc., she shows understanding and sympathy to the

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persona of her poems as an observer. This does not mean that she distances herself from black and feminist cultures for instance, for she tackles themes relating to subjugated groups and their suffering. However, she does not want to be categorized because she believes this will set limitations to her. In “Rita Dove: Crossing Boundaries”, Ekaterini Georgaudaki quotes Arnold Pampersad’s opinion that Dove is keen to “transcend- if not actually to repudiate- black cultural nationalism in the name of more inclusive sensibility. (Georgaudaki, 1991, 421). In *Language’s Bliss of Unfolding* in and through History, *Autobiography and Myth: The Poetry of Rita Dove*, Carol Keyes argues that Dove’s poetry “simultaneously enacts a positioning within the discourse that continuously moves away from categorization as anything other than, or less than, American poetry” (Keyes, 1999, 4).

In her *Tradition and the Individual Talent in the works of Rita Dove*, G. Beulah attributes this attitude to Dove’s desire to be an “Afro-modernist” who “adopts a new kind of universalism, which Trey Ellis identifies as “the New Black Aesthetic” (Beulah, 2013, 172). To Beulah, this is “Dove’s new cultural mulatto identity” through which she “could perceive both cultures, both audiences, and both criticisms” (174). In her analysis of Dove’s choice of the title of her first collection, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, Beulah believes that Dove chooses the yellow color to reverberate her “cultural mulatto identity”. As for the corner house, she indicates that it implies Dove’s identity and a direction for people. “Because it does not fit in the group, it is away from the rest of the houses in the corner” (174). In this sense, the poet tries her best to avoid being classified under any literary trend that would not allow her to approach all readers.

As a global citizen, Dove usually addresses politics, history, gender, sexism and universal themes in her works. However, because the main objective of the article is the poet’s depiction of oppression of marginalized people, light will be cast on the poet’s handling of the narratives of slaves and the oppressed. Dove seeks to tell the readers the untold stories of ordinary people who have

always been ignored in written history. In her abovementioned article, Georgaudaki postulates that the poet's focus on the small people and minor events reflects the poet's "distaste" of the conventional history telling and interpretation. Instead, "she adopts a retrospective and reconstructive method and she includes what the American and other cultures have excluded" (Georgaudaki, 1991, 421). Relating to Dove's biographical verse-novel *Thomas and Beulah*, Kevin Stein in "Lives in Motion: Multiple Perspectives in Rita Dove's Poetry", explains how Dove deals with public and private histories:

the poet's primary task becomes to attend to (and thus "decode") both the realm of public history, supposedly factual and objective, and that of private history, woven the subjective thread of familial and individual memory...Dove then re-encodes these accounts, using poetic imagination to infuse bare "fact" with the flash of insight and human emotion...The result is a poem...which seeks a poetic "truth" neither historical or ahistorical, neither wholly true nor wholly invented. (Stein, 1995, 52)

Lekha Roy and Rano Ringo, in 'Liminality and Otherness: Exploring Transcultural Space in Rita Dove's *The Yellow House on the Corner*', study Dove's poetry relying on David Hollinger's post-ethnicity theory where the author identifies that the American social solidarity depends on favoring national or post-ethnic bond over ethnic or racial pride. This requires that each social group must stop "othering" those who belong to the other ethnicities. As a result, sense of "otherness" minor or subjugated groups experience will diminish leading to boosting their sense of nationalism. Roy and Ringo believe that this is what Dove has always been doing in her poetry. Because Dove believes "that the emphasis on Blackness only legitimises the white normative through recognition of ethno-racial blocs and the one-drop rule, Dove seeks to counter the racialisation of memory in her poetry". Additionally, [h]er poetry exhibits a realisation that African Americans, in claiming a closed ethnocentric identity, had

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alienated themselves further from the centre” (Roy & Ringo, 2013, 4).

Therefore, Dove relates to slave narratives in her early poetry not only out of Afro-American consciousness but also as part of the world history. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, she stated that she is concerned with race as a black woman but not obsessed with this fact. Her works are “poems about humanity, and sometimes humanity happens to be black.”

Unlike the majority of studies about the poet such as the aforementioned, this article tackles an understudied area in Rita Dove’s poetry, namely, the role of nature as a major tool the poet relies on to convey her themes and help readers view things from her spectacles. It will mainly focus on the theme of oppression as depicted in the slave narratives from her first collection, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, and “Parsley” from the second one, *Museum* respectively. The article will, therefore, provide a quick review of the term and its subsequent concepts.

As per Poetry Foundation⁽¹⁾, ecopoetics is “a multidisciplinary approach that includes thinking and writing on poetics, science, and theory as well as emphasizing innovative approaches common to conceptual poetry.” It is marked by its emphasis on drawing connections between human activity—specifically the making of poems—and the environment that produces it.” Therefore, “it is not quite nature poetry.” Another definition of the term is made by Tom Bristow⁽²⁾, who argues that ecopoetics studies

(a) how the human is situated within its habitat; (b) how “home” is defined and built; (c) where (or whether) borders exist between body and world, human and other, space and place; and (d) how sense activities, physical presences, memory, and moments of thinking locate and assist the

⁽¹⁾ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/ecopoetics>

⁽²⁾ Bristow, Tom. “Ecopoetics” in *Facts on File Companion to World Poetry: 1900 to Present* Ed. R. Victoria Arana. New York: Facts on File, 2008. PP156-159.

human desire to navigate the self in the world. (Bristow, 2008, 156)

In *Unnatural Ecopoetics: Unlikely Spaces in Contemporary Poetry*, Sarah Nolan relies on the concept “naturecultures” coined by Donna Haraway who defines it as “the implosions of the discursive realms of nature and culture,” and builds on material ecocriticism’s proposed breakdown of recognizable boundaries between natural and human spaces, objects, thoughts, and agencies” (Nolan, 2017, 11). In other words, Nolan believes that ecopoetics focuses on the physical setting in the text, i.e. natural elements and man-made objects as well as the poet/speaker’s emotions, feelings, history, personality, mindset and worldviews.

She terms concrete objects as material elements and abstract concepts as non-material ones.

I use the term “material” throughout this book as a way of pointing to the breakdown of boundaries between nature and culture, where “material” stands in for all physical objects and places, whether man-made or occurring naturally in the world. “Nonmaterial,” on the other hand, refers to the invisible emotional, historical, political, and personal elements that influence the speaker’s experience of space and translation of it to the textual space of the poem. (Nolan, 2017, 11)

Nolan argues that such elements whether natural/material or unnatural/material or non-material, influence the poet’s experience, reinforce the main theme(s) and/or reveal the speaker’s or the author’s character, mood, thoughts and feelings. In this sense, Nolan broadens the spectrum of ecopoetics to encompass not only environmental aspects or issues, and unnatural elements in literary works but also the interaction between the environment and the literary text. To her, it is a pressing matter to adopt this conception in analyzing the literary works of contemporary writers because they “do not live in a world where nature is distinguishable

from culture, where language is distinct from literature, or where the digital is decipherable from the real” (Nolan, 2017, 15).

Dove’s natural and unnatural ecopoetics

The article studies some selected poems of the first two collections where the material, i.e., natural or man-made, and non-material elements play a significant role in conveying the poet’s theme and persona’s thought and feelings. These poems also illustrate the interaction between both natural and man-made elements on the one hand and the persona on the other. This interaction indicates how the environment is an integral part of the poet’s experience when dealing with issues related to history and ethnicity.

In the first collection, for example, Dove wrote about different topics related to the past and present. Those related to the past are about narratives of marginalized African-American slaves. In these poems, Dove sheds light on oppression the black slaves suffered at the hands of the white masters. Through a stark comparison between the whites and blacks, Dove lets readers perceive history from the spectacles of the oppressed. These poems, therefore, discuss the blacks’ misery in slavery, their attitude toward oppression and their own view about the whites.

“The House Slave”, for instance, deliberates the horrifying practices of the masters against the slaves. The speaker, a sick house slave, draws a comparison between the humiliation of enslaved blacks and the luxury of white masters. Both abstract and concrete elements in this poem emphasize this striking contrast.

The first horn lifts its arm over the dew-lit grass
and in the slave quarters there is a rustling –
children are bundled into aprons, cornbread
and water gourds grabbed, a salt pork breakfast taken.
I watch them driven into the vague before-dawn

while their mistress sleeps like an ivory toothpick
and Massa dreams of asses, rum and slave funk.

Through this comparison, Dove emphasizes the slaves' sense of oppression and humiliation. They have to wake up and work under any conditions to avoid being scourged. On the contrary, the white mistress sleeps and the master is involved in his lustfulness even in his dreams. However, Dove implies more than oppression in this comparison. She highlights the non-material aspects of both parties to imply how sentimental the black slaves are. On the contrary, she implies how the sleeping mistress who is as white as ivory, indicating her financial status, yet she is as insignificant as a toothpick. The same disparaging implication is applicable to the Massa whose lustful nature reflects how intellectually shallow he is.

Although the house slave is sick, she "cannot sleep again" because she must get up before the second horn which is usually accompanied with scourging "the backs of the laggards." Ironically, when the whiteness of cotton fields unfolds, it bears the glad tidings of a promising harvest to the white master whereas it represents a warning sign to the humble slaves that more labor is awaiting them:

I cannot fall asleep again. At the second horn,
the whip curls across the backs of the laggards –
sometimes my sister's voice, unmistakable, among them.
"Oh! pray," she cries. "Oh! pray!" Those days
I lit on my cot, shivering in the early heat,
and as the fields unfold to whiteness,
and they spill like bees among the fat flowers,
I weep. It is not yet daylight.

As non-material elements, oppression and sense of helplessness reveal how Dove sympathizes with the slaves and speaks out their suffering. The speaker's sister is among the flogged laggards but

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both know that no one can protect her or any other slave. The sister, hence, asks the speaker only to pray for them. In fever, the speaker naively comments on the early timing as if the masters' humiliating treatment of slaves is unquestionably justified.

sometimes my sister's voice, unmistakable, among them.
"Oh! pray," she cries. "Oh! pray!" Those days
I lit on my cot, shivering in the early heat,
and as the fields unfold to whiteness,
and they spill like bees among the fat flowers,
I weep. It is not yet daylight.

The family bond is another non-material element foregrounded in the poem. Carol Keyes comments on how this tie is influenced by the white's oppressive attitude toward the black slaves,

In "The House Slave", the poem provides witness once more of slavery's impact on the family of the enslaved The ordinary, historical experiences explored in such poems become the individual's ordinary experiences of History—as brutalities and daily indignities that rupture the family structures, (as well as individuals and communities). (Keyes, 1999, 23)

Dove, thus, employs both material and non-material elements in this poem to expose an untold scene of the upsetting life of the blacks under slavery. The white masters dehumanized them through their aggressive attitude which made the poor slaves think only of how to avoid physical punishment.

"The Slave's Critique of Practical Reason" is another example where natural and unnatural ecopoetics reflect oppression as a common practice of white masters against black slaves. Intuitively, Dove uses the title of one of the three famous critiques written by Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Practical Reason* is the second critique about the German Philosopher's theory of ethics and morality. The similarity between the two titles is not meant to compare the slave to the philosopher. Rather, it is employed to introduce the slave as a thinking human, thereby refuting the then-widely-spread claim

that the blacks are mentally unequal to the whites. In this poem, Dove illustrates the rationality of the slave's reasoning concerning why he does not think of escaping from his master.

Ain't got a reason
to run away-
leastways, not one
would save my life.
so I scoop speculation
into a hopsack.

The speaker, a slave, says he has no reason to escape from his white master, an attitude that may be shocking to the reader. However, if this opinion is pragmatically analyzed, it will indicate the rational thinking of this slave because he admits "not one [way of escape]/would save my life". Roy and Ringo suggest that

"Dove's use of black colloquial language along with a word like 'speculation', denoting the black man as a thinking individual, deconstructs the hegemonising nature of Whiteness that reduces the black man to naught but 'the Owl/ of the Broken Spirit'" (Roy & Ringo, 2013, 18-19).

This means that the slave's sense of helplessness stems out from his deep conviction that law, society and even the environment are all against him and none of his fellow slaves will be able to offer help.

Additionally, the speaker internalizes the standards of the hegemonizing white culture. He believes that the white color is the prototype of goodness, beauty and life while black is a stereotype symbolizing evil, ugliness and death. Commenting on this, Saleh Abulrahman in "Racial Identity in Rita Dove's Poetry" argues:

The persona in Dove's poetry is unable to understand the reason that everything can be transformed into whiteness- that is cleanness, goodness, independence- but only him who is doomed to be " the only dark spot in the sky". This

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black-white contradiction brings with it the associations of black as evil and white as goodness ... (Abdulrahman, 2012, 52)

This adoption of white-centric standards is foregrounded through two comparisons the speaker draws. Firstly, there is a contrast between him as “the only dark/ spot in in the sky” and the blooming field of white cotton. In the other, the speaker poses a paradox between his mistress and him. He highly praises how his white Lady pays attention to children out of her goodness. At the same time, he underestimates himself and deliberately disregards his effort to entertain them.

All day Our Lady
of the Milk-Tooth
attends them
while I, the Owl
of the Broken Spirit
keep dipping and
thinking up tunes
that fly off quick
as they hit
the air.....

Hence, self-oppression is introduced, i.e., internalized oppression which functions as an unnatural/non-material element. In “Internalized Racial Oppression in the African American Community”, Tamba-Kuui M. Bailey, Wendi S. Williams, and Brian Favors identify this process where African Americans

internalize and accept the dominant White culture’s oppressive actions and beliefs toward Black people (e.g., negative stereotypes, discrimination, hatred, falsification of historical facts, racist doctrines, White supremacist

ideology), while at the same time rejecting the African worldview and cultural motifs. (Baily et al, 2014, 137)

The speaker, as a consequence, intentionally disregards the whites' enslavement of him and millions of his fellow Africans whereas he praises their beauty and efficiency. At the same time, he condemns his ugliness and uselessness. Thus, both natural and unnatural ecopoetics intensify the sense of oppression some slaves experience but this time it comes from within.

In "The Transport of Slaves from Maryland to Mississippi", further, the poet recounts a historical incident which she briefly summarizes before the poem.

(On August 22, 1839, a wagon of slaves broke the chains, killed two white men, and would have escaped, had not a slave woman helped the Negro driver mount his horse and ride for help.)

Dove imagines the unheard part of the story, i.e., the slave woman's supposed reasoning that made her help the black driver regardless of the serious consequences that would befall her and the other slaves. One can expect how the slaves feel the woman betrays them and . It is also predictable why the black driver was keen on delivering them to the white master; he wants to avoid his master's wrath and/or get some reward for delivering the new slaves. However, the woman's deed was incredibly shocking. Although the behavior of the woman and that of the driver make them appear on the same side against the other slaves, their motives are utterly different.

I don't know if I helped him up
Because I thought he was our salvation
Or not.

.....
*The Skin across his cheekbones
burst open like baked yams –*

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deliberate, the eyelids came apart –

his eyes were my eyes in a yellower face.

Death and salvation –one accommodates the other.

I am no brute. I got feelings.

He might have been a son of mine.

Helen Vendler in “Rita Dove Identity Markers” suggests that Dove attempts to neutrally present “the Negro driver’s conflict between economic loyalty and race-loyalty, and the Negro Woman’s conflict between group-loyalty to her fellow escapees and race-loyalty to the driver” (Vendler, 1994, 383). However, one could read his attitude differently. The black driver’s “yellower face” suggests that the driver is afraid of his master’s aggressive reaction. Losing these slaves may lead to his own death while finding them is his only salvation. As the two ends are possible, each “one accommodates the other.” The horror in his eyes implies his master’s oppressive nature. As the woman might have been a mother to him, she perceives that his life is on the stake. Like any protective mother, she has the moral obligation to do anything to defend him, so she decides to sacrifice her and her fellows’ freedom for his sake. Dove ascribes the woman’s action to the powerful instinct of motherhood to defend her against the accusation of betraying her own fellows.

In Stein’s aforementioned article, he interprets the woman’s and the driver’s attitudes from another angle. He assumes, “denied her humanity by slavery, she nonetheless displays it through her compassionate actions, though she fatefully dooms both her fellows and herself to further slavery” (Stein, 1995, 55). He also suggests that the yellower face of the driver testifies that he is the outcome of a forced sex between a white master and a black woman, which might be “a version of her own fate and of her own victimization” (ibid, 55-56).

Moreover, Vendler suggests that the poet implicitly conveys an important message in this poem concerning the mutual accusations

of brutality and mercilessness between the blacks and the whites. That is, “One group “knows” another largely through the shifting ground of suspicion and prejudice, denying in each other a shared humanity which the poem’s slave woman tragically embodies” (Vendler, 1994, 56). Further, one can sense that she presumably wants to demonstrate that this suspicious and prejudiced attitude could also exist among the same racial group as exemplified here by the driver and woman on the one hand, and the other slaves on the other. The poem also implies what Dove persistently advocates in many poems, that the blacks are no less humane than other races, thus rejecting stigmatizing the blacks as “brute[s].” Thus, the unnatural/non-material element, i.e., the hypothetical mother-son bond Dove summons to justify the woman’s keenness to protect the driver from being oppressed by his master. Also, the poet underlines the similarity in features and color between them as a clue for such familial ties.

Another poem where natural and unnatural ecopoetics are in use is “Kentucky 1833”. The setting is a plantation where the white master, his friends and his slaves spend their time on Sunday. The year 1833 is of extreme importance because in this date the state of Kentucky passed a law outlawing the importation of slaves to the state. The poem is likely written in prose to suit the care-free situation. The slaves’ awareness of their limits under slavery is illustrated throughout the whole poem. They know that it is out of their master’s kindness they are “let out in the woods”. They are also conscious that their enjoyment is bound to the rules set by the Massa. For example, the one who wins in the boxing game, cannot enjoy the reward of a cup of whisky unless he “drinks it all in one swig without choking.” Only one of the slaves could read and she has been reading the Bible until “Massa forbade it.” The white master’s attitude indicates his obsession with controlling the slaves because literacy and faith would encourage them to claim their rights and aspire to freedom. The master’s attitude also conforms to the then-widely-spread conviction that the blacks are less than humans. Therefore, the speaker who internalizes oppression, describes how their slave children play and “butt their heads like

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sheep” whereas he politely mentions “the Massa and his gentlemen.” Comparing the two attitudes, Lyn Graham Barzilai, in “On the Brink: “Kentucky 1833”, suggests that the slaves’ attitude is justified because they “are untamed by culture, and lack the refinement of their white owners.” What is unjustified is the uncivilized behavior of the white masters whose behavior “carries more sinister undertones: they “guffaw and shout, taking sides, red-faced” as they urge the young slaves to display their prowess at wrestling” (Barzilai, 2008, 757).

Dove insinuates that the slaves, despite illiteracy and total submission, they appreciate art as their circle the banjo player to listen to music. As well, they are aware of the value of education and faith that “would change [their]lives.” However, Barzilai argues that through the parallel attitudes of the master and slave about the myth of Jason, the paradox is heightened. “Massa is engaged in actions, the “doings” of the story, the slaves are occupied in introspection about their situation, with a view to understanding their circumstances and interpreting their future.” This introspective mood reflects the slaves’ self-realization as a result of enlightenment that the white master seems to lack (ibid, 758).

Natural ecopoetics is present through the environment which reflects the blacks’ subjugation, helplessness and unattainable dreams. A sad tone is perceived in the three prose stanzas which include an unreachable end. “Each of the three prose stanzas in the poem ends with a statement or suggestion of something not available, something beyond the limits of what’s possible for those enslaved” (Keyes, 1999, 26). It was a sunny Sunday where the weather is “an odd monkey”, probably because of its unpredictability. It seems that this weather is hostile to them for it is as oppressive as the white master. During working days, the weather is a further burden on them as “his cotton eye is everywhere.” Like the speaker in “The Slave’s Critique of Practical Reason,” the speaking slave considers the whiteness of cotton and the bright sunshine ominous to the working slaves for they

represent alarming signs that a lot of work is ahead of them. Moreover, the sunlight “sifts down like the finest cornmeal, coating our hands and arms with a dust.” Although the slaves recognize that holy dust or “skitter of brass,” they cannot “call it by name” out of their helplessness. The Massa praises Jason, the winner in the boxing game, by comparing him to the Greek mythological hero, Jason. The poor slave believes “he’s been born to great things.” These great things are symbolized by stunning costumes: “a suit with gold thread, vest and all.” Unfortunately, this dream is unlikely because the master would never set him free. Jason, therefore, ended up sprawling “under a tree and the sun.” In this sense, the golden color functions as an unattainable dream of the oppressed slaves.

In “Someone’s Blood,” the material and non-material elements intricately convey one of the most painful experiences the blacks used to experience under slavery; i.e., separating the mother and child. The speaker is an unidentifiable child whose slave mother has to leave them probably forever. Dove, again as a mother, tackles this complicated situation through illustrating the child and mother feelings. For example, the mother, in addition to her sense of oppression and humiliation, she feels guilty for bringing that child to this cruel world, let alone the torment she suffers because this might be the last time to see her child. On the contrary, the child experiences internal conflict. They are silent, yet their description of the mother’s sense of guilt is indicative of their hesitation whether to forgive her or not.

I stood at 6 a.m. on the wharf,
thinking: This is Independence, Missouri.
I am to stay here. The boat goes on to New Orleans.
My life seemed minutes old, and here it was ending.
I was silent, although she clasped me
and asked forgiveness for giving me life.

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In the next lines, the various material tools reflect that the mother and child are torn apart. The sun is broken on the water's surface and turn to "a thousand needles/tipped with the blood from someone's finger." The reddish light of sunrise reminds them of the blood bond which is about to be severed. Her child keeps watching the mother "till her face could not distinguish itself/ from that shadow floated on broken sunlight." The child's standing still in this situation suggests the contradictory feelings they have. On the one hand, they stand and keep watching because they have this natural love for their mother and most likely feel sorry for her. On the other, being silent and letting her go indicates that they feel sorry for themselves and cannot get rid of the idea that she is one of the main reasons for their miserable life. However, the child's positive feelings toward their mother triumph over the negative ones. Although they could not end the conflict of them both, they forgive her.

The last poem in this article is "Parsley" which, unlike previous poems, focuses on the oppression the Haitian peasants who suffered at the hands of Rafael Trujilo, the Dominican dictator. The poet selected this historical atrocity where about twenty thousand farm laborers -as Dove mentioned in an endnote - were killed for not being able to pronounce the /r/ sound in perejil, Spanish for Parsley.

In her interview with Claire Schwartz (2016), the poet expresses her motive to write about this massacre,

Instead of thinking of evil as a force just blazing through, destroying things, I began to understand that evil could be creative, devious—that evil is human and, therefore, part of us. This is what was haunting me. This is what I needed to get behind. So, I opened myself up to possibility. And in that realm, I was completely free to imagine a scenario which humanizes evil, but also would explain why Trujillo chose that particular word, perejil, for his shibboleth.

The poem is divided into two parts. The first section is a villanelle entitled “the Cane Fields”. The oppressed peasants speak of their misery because of the arduous work the cane fields require, the humiliation practiced on them by the despotic regime and the tragic end awaiting them. In the second, however, the first-person speaker of Trujillo or El General and a third-person commentator exchange voice.

From the beginning, Dove implicitly suggests a similarity between the caged parrot and the field workers because both have no control over their lives. They are all marked by unnatural greenness: the “parrot [is] imitating spring”, “its feathers [are] parsley green” and the Haitian peasants “lie down screaming as rain punches through” and “come out green.” Keyes suggests that

Everything in “Parsley” represents a perversion, including most pervasively the perversion of language. In the first section, the images of nature gather an increasingly ominous sensibility and are linked in the second section to the general’s perversions of his grief over his mother’s death...in “Parsley,” El General appropriates the parrot as talisman of perversion. The spring the parrot imitates is the General’s perversion of mother love (in his inability to grieve her properly according to the customs of his land), also that of the spring called to mind in the workers coming up “green” after their slaughter, ... (Keyes, 1999, 68).

Thus, green color brings no glad tidings to the exiled parrot or the migrant farmers because it is only a false pretension, despite its usual association with the productive season of spring.

In the first section, the surrounding environment sheds light on the non-material elements; i.e., the farmers’ feelings of subjugation, sadness and fear. For example, the cane is a natural element which is present throughout the whole villanelle perhaps to remind the poor peasants of the hard work or to represent a symbolic cage to those them.

...The cane appears

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in our dreams, lashed by wind and streaming.

And we lie down. For every drop of blood

there is a parrot imitating spring.

Out of the swamp the cane appears.

The swamp, another natural/material element symbolizes the unknown unknown danger looming over. A third element, Mount Katalina, furthers their sense of dwarfishness and helplessness. Thus, they are haunted by fear and insecurity because they anticipate something ominous from that evil ruler.

Out of the swamp, the cane appears

to haunt us, and we cut it down. El General

searches for a word; he is all the world

there is...

.....

El General has found his word: perejil.

Who says it, lives. He laughs, teeth shining

out of the swamp...

In the other section entitled "The Palace", Dove navigates the dictator's mind through stream of consciousness technique to "humanize" Trujillo's sick mentality. Also, a third-person voice comments on the whole situation. Stein argues,

...the poem's second section, a third person narrative, traces the general's wrapped thought processes in a language markedly different from that of the villanelle. This parrot, the green cane fields, the rain, and other lyric elements of the first section reappear, but this time they're couched in flat, declarative sentences that highlight the surreal quality of the general's stream of consciousness: (Stein, 1995, 61)

In her attempt to humanize evil, the poet focuses, like the aforementioned poems on the mother possibly because she is

aware of the great influence of mothers on their children. Being an ordinary woman living in a plantation, Trujillo's mother leads a mundane life which her son seems to disdain. However, he loves her and respects her cane, his mother's only belonging as it seems.

It is fall, when thoughts turn
to love and death; the general thinks
of his mother, how she died in the fall
and he planted her walking cane at the grave
and it flowered, each spring stolidly forming
four-star blossoms...

Trujillo, as per Rita Dove's characterization, sheds tears when he hears a voice similar to his mother's.

Someone
calls out his name in a voice
so like his mother's, a startled tear
splashes the tip of his right boot.

My mother, my love in death.

The other non-material elements highlighted in this section are his sadism and scorn for others. For example, he looks down on his soldiers ignoring their sacrifices even during war time. El General does not show mercy on the dying soldier only because the latter stains his boots with mud and urine. Rather, he embraces inhumanity when he makes fun of the soldier's miserable condition saying "how stupid he looked!" Dove imagines such a situation so that the reader could understand how Trujillo could give commands to execute thousands of innocent farmers "for a single, beautiful word."

His sadist attitude is exposed even in his steps. He does not walk like ordinary people; rather, he stomps the floor with his heavy boots. "As he paces, he wonders/ Who can I kill today." Dove ends this question with a full-stop possibly to emphasize the

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general's determination to fulfill his sick desire and that it is taken for granted. He believes nothing could stop him and is sure that whatever he intends to do will happen. The irony here lies in that fact that Dove intended to humanize evil through Trujillo but a question like this implies that his amplified ego incites him to act as if he were a god whose will determines who dies and who lives.

Thereupon, "Parsley" is one of the most important poems Dove wrote about oppression for it tackles the topic from the points of view of the victimized and the victimizer. It also raises the destructive power of language as a main theme. Stein poses that "the poem offers a meditation on history examined through the powers and permutations of language" (Stein, 1995, 62). Rita Dove also employs natural and unnatural ecopoetics including abstract and concrete elements to guarantee that readers perceive the despotic nature of Trujillo and the miseries of innocent farmers who were brutally murdered because they could not roll the "R" properly.

Conclusion

In the selected poems examined in the article, Rita Dove approaches the history of slavery to give voice to the marginalized: the enslaved African in the United States and Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic. The article sheds light on how the poet employs nature to convey various messages to the reader. It explores this functioning of nature from the spectacles of ecopoetics. It examines how Dove marries all possible natural/material and un-natural/non-material elements as a means to highlight the suffering of the oppressed. The article approaches the selected poems through the lens of ecopoetics and unnatural ecopoetics to discuss the broad spectrum of elements used by the poet.

One of the conclusions the article points to is that the poet successfully gains the reader's sympathy for the oppressed through the depiction of the black slaves and the innocent farmers. In order to show her sympathy and urges the reader to sympathize with

these subjugated people, the poet portrays all the oppressed in a way that indicates how helpless and submissive they are such the speaker in “The House Slave”, the mother in “Someone’s Blood”, and the Haitian farmers in first part of “Parsley”. She also depicts the characters of the white masters and Trujillo to reveal their awkwardness, cruelty and sadism. The poet also underlines the unheard-of suffering of the subjugated. For example, the poems attract attention to the physically arduous work in the cotton and cane fields. They also draw attention to the psychological suffering they experience as a daily routine. Issues like separating children from their slave mothers are discussed to reflect racist practices of the white oppressors against the helpless slaves.

Another finding is Dove’s keenness to accentuate the humanity and humaneness of the slave persona, a fact that was deliberately ignored by the whites. She illustrates their sentimentality and kind-heartedness, e.g. the slave woman in “The Transport of Slaves from Maryland to Mississippi” to give evidence that they are sometimes more humane than their oppressing masters. The poet is also earnest to indicate that they have sound reasoning and good taste. For instance, the slaves love music and have fertile imagination and high aspirations in “Kentucky 1833.” Also the farm slave has rational thinking in “The Slave’s Critique of Practical Reason”. All this proves not only they are better than the shallow-minded white landlords but also implies that those subjugated slaves would excel over their fellow whites if only they enjoyed equal opportunities and full citizenship rights.

However, it is observed that the poet makes some of the speakers internalize the euro-centric standards and racist classification of people based on color where black is always stigmatized and white is highly praised. That is, she employs the contrast between black and white in the slave narratives signifying that black color is synonymous to ugliness in comparison to the white color that is synonymous to beauty and goodness. In a few poems, however, she poses the opposite views of the oppressor and the oppressed about the same phenomenon. For instance, cotton whiteness and sunshine represent a good omen to the white masters

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while they are ominous to the black slaves. Thereupon, Dove's functioning of natural and unnatural ecopoetics helps to demonstrate oppression as a daily practice of the sadist victimizers against the victimized slaves and Haitian migrants.

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