

The Doctrine of Resistance in Claude McKay's Poem “If We Must Die” and Alice Walker's Poem “Torture”

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Abstract

Resistance is an unquestioned and sacred act for black American masses. They believe that resistance is a matter of justice. Hence, defiance turns to be a kind of doctrine by which they can defend themselves. The origin of African Americans' resistance against persecution and injustice can be traced back to the first slave ship that have reached American shores. Slavery was encountered with different types of resistance such as rebellion, politics, the civil war, etc. The blacks organized resistance by establishing vigorous committed societies. Many black institutions and organizations contributed to assert the blacks' right of freedom and equality.

The black resistance in the United States indicates liberty, activism and hope. Resistance is engrained in the black consciousness as a dogma and a weapon against despotism. African Americans trust that their dream of justice and equal opportunities will come true. Thus they keep dreaming and resisting.

The present study tackles the doctrine of resistance in the poems "If We Must Die" by Claude Mckay and "Torture" by Alice Walker. Both poets adopt resistance from a different point of view. Mckay calls the blacks for violent and suicidal acts of resistance since it is the only viable option for this oppressed group and the only way they can regain their dignity and freedom. Whereas Walker invokes her people to defy the torture of the enemy by planting a tree, which reflects the blacks' peaceful struggle and their preservation of resistance. Walker's poem can be described as a respond to aggression in a civilized manner as well as a call for tolerance and self-restraint. Moreover, both poems convey the poets' faith in their resistance skills to resolve the conflict existing between white and black races.

Key words: resistance, torture, death, blacks, whites, prejudice.

عقيدة المقاومة في قصيدة كلود مكاي "إذا كان لا بد أن نموت"

وقصيدة أليس ووكر "التعذيب"

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المستخلص

المقاومة هي عمل مقدس لا جدال فيه بالنسبة للجماهير الأمريكية السوداء. فهم يؤمنون ان المقاومة هي مسألة عدالة. لذلك تحولت المقاومة إلى نوع من العقيدة التي يمكنهم من خلالها الدفاع عن أنفسهم. يمكن تتبع أصل مقاومة الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي ضد الاضطهاد والظلم إلى أول سفينة عبيد وصلت إلى الشواطئ الأمريكية. وقد واجهت العبودية أنواعًا مختلفة من المقاومة مثل التمرد والسياسة والحرب الأهلية وما إلى ذلك. نظم السود المقاومة من خلال إنشاء مجتمعات ملتزمة قوية وقد ساهمت العديد من المؤسسات والمنظمات السوداء في تأكيد حق السود في الحرية والمساواة.

تشير المقاومة السوداء في الولايات المتحدة إلى الحرية والنشاط والأمل. إن المقاومة متأصلة في الوعي الأسود كعقيدة وسلاح ضد الاستبداد. يعتقد الأمريكيون من أصل أفريقي أن حلمهم في العدالة وتكافؤ الفرص سوف يتحقق، وهكذا يستمرون في الحلم والمقاومة.

تتناول الدراسة الحالية عقيدة المقاومة في قصيدة كلود مكاي "إذا كان يجب أن نموت" وقصيدة أليس ووكر "التعذيب". كلا الشاعرين يتبنى المقاومة من وجهة نظر مختلفة. يدعو ماكاي السود إلى ارتكاب أعمال مقاومة عنيفة وانتحارية لأنه الخيار الوحيد القابل للتطبيق لهذه المجموعة المضطهدة والطريقة الوحيدة التي يمكنهم من خلالها استعادة كرامتهم وحريتهم. في حين تدعو ووكر شعبها لتحدي تعذيب العدو من خلال زرع شجرة، مما يعكس نضال السود السلمي وحفاظهم على المقاومة. ويمكن وصف قصيدة ووكر بأنها رد على العدوان بطريقة حضارية ودعوة إلى التسامح وضبط النفس. علاوة على ذلك، تنقل القصيدتان إيمان الشعراء بمهاراتهم في المقاومة لحل الصراع القائم بين العرقين الأبيض والأسود.

الكلمات المفتاحية: resistance, torture, death, blacks, whites, prejudice.

1. Introduction

Resistance can be defined as constancy and resilience in the face of challenges and obstacles. It expresses the struggle against oppression and injustice. Furthermore, resistance is the right to defend oneself, freedom, belief, values and identity. If the resistance aims to liberate the land and people, then the means to achieve this goal are of many kinds; resistance may be armed, or it may be political, cultural, or civil, representing the spontaneous action of the masses as a reaction against aggression. Poetry is one of the means of resistance, hence, black poets employ their verse to defend their right to live in dignity.

African- American poets use their poetry to stimulate, indoctrinate and empower the black masses. The thoughts and principles of the Harlem Renaissance had a great effect upon the black resistance. The Harlem

Renaissance was a large "New Negro movement" that emerged after the First World War, and paved the way for the rise of "The Civil Rights movement" of the forties and fifties of the last century. A social basis for this movement includes a mass migration of African Americans from countryside to cities, to look for better jobs, and from the South to the North, to escape violence and segregation (Ferguson 2008, p. 8). The Harlem Renaissance contributed to social and economic opportunities to promote racial pride, including African sensitivity and programs. The movement focused on the African legacy. It was a revitalization of the black intellect and culture. The black community of Harlem was characterized by "youthful strength" and "self-conscious sophistication," (Huggins 1971,14) that attracted "black people all over the world" (Ferguson, p. 8).

Multitude of soldiers returned home from combatting in Europe to find that their jobs in factories, warehouses, and mills had been occupied by Southern blacks newcomers. The economic instability resulted in an ethnic biases. Meanwhile, After their achievements in the First World War, the black soldiers anticipated to gain equality and be a part of the white society. African American ex-servicemen who had endangered themselves struggling for liberty and equalitarianism found themselves deprived of basic rights as suitable residence and equality before the law, which made them more militant. (Huggins, p. 15).

There was an urgent need to reconsider the black identity and change the image of slavery. African Americans have pursued different ways to nourish and defend their lives, and to free themselves physically and intellectually via "armed resistance, voluntary emigration, nonviolence, education, literature, sports, media, and legislation/politics" ("Black Resistance," 2023, para. 1). The black intellectuals tried to elevate interest in Negro culture and Negro history. Thus the term "New Negro," was vulgarized during the Harlem Renaissance to refer to the independent and cultured blacks (Gates,1988, p. 130). As many black poets, Claude McKay(1889-1949) and Alice Walker (1944-) tried to redefine themselves to be new negroes through their visions of resistance.

2. Racism in the United States

Prejudice against African Americans goes back to the colonial period, and has remained a dominant problem in American community throughout

the twentieth century and its aftermath. From the coming of the first Africans in 1619 until after the "American Civil War" in 1865, most African Americans were treated as slaves. The sociocultural approach views racism as ideas and practices rooted in a culture. Thereby, individuals shape culture and culture shapes individuals. Accordingly, enslavement and racism in the United States turned to be a cultural conduct that affected the blacks existence. Blacks were deprived of the fundamental "rights and privileges including voting, humanistic freedoms, such as use of certain public facilities, and access to education." (Ronale,2011, p.4) Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth American president and the leader of the Civil War (1861-1865), resisted slavery through the Emancipation Proclamation. One of the outcomes of the Civil War was the establishing of educational institutions for the blacks, which were supported by religious associations and the Freed man's Bureau. Furthermore, Plessey v. Ferguson, the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in 1896, aimed at providing "separate but equal" facilities and chances for the African Americans (Myers, 1989, p. 46). However, this law was not completely implemented. The blacks separated from the whites, thus separation was achieved, but the equality was absent, since the institutions of the blacks were inferior to those of the whites.

Even freed African Americans encountered limitations on their political, social, and economic freedoms. They were exposed to lynching, discrimination, Jim Crow laws and black laws. Jim Crow laws lasted for about a century from the post- Civil War period until 1968. These laws legalized racial discrimination. They marginalized the blacks and deprived them of their fundamental rights as human beings. If these laws were broken by the blacks, the punishment would be imprisonment, violence and even death (Boskin, 1976, p.21).

During the early twentieth century, large groups of African Americans moved from the South to the North and West. The principal reason for this movement was the ceaseless ethnic violence, such as lynching and racist assassinations targeting black individuals from the south. (Blackwell, 1991, p. 30) Such atmosphere of slavery, oppression and segregation stimulated the black intellectuals, artists and poets to face this injustice and to protest against repression by means of their work.

2. 1. Red Summer the Racial Riots of 1919

Violence against blacks had already begun before the summer in resident incidents. The Awakening of black America emerged as a deadly unrest in Jenkins County when black churches were burned and black men were murdered. The violence was just the beginning of riots and mass killings across the country, producing devastation and destruction to thousands , but awakening millions of black people to fight for rights. The summer months witnessed violent attacks initiated to escalate in main cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, as black people migrated in substantial numbers in quest for proper opportunities that were absent in the South. During that period, race relations worsened further under the administration of President Woodrow Wilson, who reinforced racist policies and racial discrimination in the federal authority. (Erickson, 1960. pp. 2293–94)

Many black soldiers, who came back from the First World War, were ill-treated and attacked while donning their military uniform. Furthermore, the white extremist "Ku Klux Klan" revived its violent activities in the South. As a result, the death toll was sixty-four killings in 1918 and eighty-three in 1919. On July 27, 1919, a young black man named Eugene Williams was swimming in "Lake Michigan" when he crossed the illegal barrier between the city's "white" and "black" beaches. A group of white men tossed rocks at Williams, hitting him, and he drowned. When police officers arrived at the scene, they rejected to arrest the white man whom black eyewitnesses had pointed to as the criminal. Angry crowds started gathering on the shore. Violence soon ignited between gangs and crowds of blacks and whites, centered in the South Side district nearby the stockyards. After the police failure to overcome the riots, the state militia was called in on the fourth day, but fighting continued until the third of August. An additional 1,000 black families were left homeless after rioters set fire to their homes. (Williams, 2007)

Additionally, Children were murdered, and lynching occurred in public squares. Numerous of African Americans were executed, shot, tortured, burned to death, mutilated, and "castrated by white mobs" who were not punished for their dreadful and unlawful acts(Ellis, 1994, pp.41-42). Despite the lynching, bombings, and riots that were largely carried out by whites

against blacks, the African Americans did not give up and defended themselves outside the law.

3. Mckay the Voice of Resistance

Before his immigration to the United States, Mckay suffered from ethnic discrimination in his homeland, Jamaica, which was a British colony. Mckay's raising in a colonial community shaped his personality and perceptions. He came to be conscious of color bias and rejected racial injustice. However, he didn't have firsthand experience with racism. In 1912, Mckay travelled to the United States to continue his study. He was stunned by the dreadful and bitter racism in the United States. Mckay stated that "*It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race*" (Mckay, 1918, 275). Hence, he developed a revolutionary attitude towards resistance against brutality and racism. In 1914, he left for New York and joined "radical political circles in Greenwich Village and Harlem." Mckay was a Communist and a revolutionary activist. He was also a member in African Blood Brotherhood, a black liberation organization. (Lowney, 2004).

Mckay was delighted by Harlem and described it as "*a paradise of my own people.*" (Wilson, 2022) He had a radical dominant voice in the Harlem Renaissance. He had established the new black identity and called for black nationalism. He endorsed equality and fought against discrimination and the unjust Jim Crow laws. His poetry appears as a shield and guide that presents consolation and direction to his dehumanized and marginalized people. Mckay became the spokesman of his oppressed people.

3. If We Must Die

Mckay's "If We Must Die" was written in 1919 as a comment and reaction to the events of Red Summer. It became "the anthem of the Red Summer" (Wilson, para 3) The poem is an invitation to the blacks to defend themselves and fight back the atrocity of the whites. It is a poem of political resistance, as it calls on the oppressed to resist their oppressors with violence and courage, regardless of whether they die in the struggle:

*If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,*

Making their mock at our accursèd lot (1-4) (Mckay, 1922)

In this poem, Mckay documents the anger and grief of his people as well as their fortitude and persistence. He refuses the disempowerment and exclusion of the blacks and calls them to confront their enemy. He vociferates for an ethnic consciousness "free of constraints that others imposed" (Helbling, 1999,105).

The poem portrays a conflict between two opposite forces. The blacks are trapped by "mad and hungry dogs," a reference to the brutal whites, who are presented as sadists that enjoy the killing and torture of the blacks. These sadistic people mock the weakness of the blacks. The white sadism is confronted by the black durability and empowerment. The persecuted people refuse to be "hunted and penned" to be killed like "hogs." According to them, death is must for they do not have options. Hence, Mckay addresses the collective consciousness of his people and encourages them to defy their enemy and face the inevitable death with honor, "If we must die, O let us nobly die"(5) . The target of the enemy is to humiliate and degrade them. The poet admits that the intense reaction and the readiness of his people to sacrifice themselves is an opportunity to reveal dignity and nobility. The poem mirrors a rejection to submit to misery in a passive way and a determination to make their sacrifice useful that leads to a meaningful change.

Mckay believes that only the African Americans have the power to defeat the challenges and accomplish an alteration in their lives, because no one "can feel fully the corroding bitterness of color discrimination. Only the black victim can" (Mckay, 1969, 88). Therefore, he calls them to reject feelings of inferiority and feebleness and to celebrate and defend their racial pride by their "precious blood." (6) "If We Must Die" can be described as a call to battle and arms. Mckay instills violent resistance tendency within the black association. The use of the pronouns "we", "our", "us" and the word "kinsmen" emphasizes that the African Americans share the same experience, fate and heritage. Thus the poet calls them to unite in order to assert their identity and to obtain their rights, "O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!/ Though far outnumbered let us show us brave." (9-10) As for Mckay, their dignity lies in their brave resistance. The poet realizes that their numerical capabilities and equipment are much less than the enemy's

capacities and power, yet he mobilizes the black masses to stand up to this aggression and fight it until their very last breath:

Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,

And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!

What though before us lies the open grave?

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (10-14)

Mckay is addressing the unconquerable spirit of the men, who intend to make their death meaningful. The lines display a rebellious and combative resistance. The tyrannized are confined "Pressed to the wall" to encounter their inescapable death, nevertheless, they refuse to yield and insist on fighting back.

3.1. The Presentation of Blacks and Whites in Mckay's Poem

To support the new economic system of capitalism in America, which depended on the exploitation of blacks in forced labor, whites promoted the concept of race and enslavement (Roediger, 1999, p. 18). Hence, the conflict between whites and blacks in the American society was based on racial prejudice. In "If We Must Die," Mckay portrays an example of a violent event, which is one of many ongoing occurrences in America. Blacks are dehumanized at the hands of whites every day. They are doomed to be killed. For blacks, death, the unquestionable truth, becomes premonition and they expect it at any moment. In his poem, Mckay calls blacks to face their inescapable fate with brave resistance and not to die like "hogs." He invites them to make their death valuable. Mckay wants to assert the blacks' worthiness and eminence. Although his Marxist beliefs, in his poem, Mckay seems to affirm a Christian doctrine. The phrase "If we Must die," recalls to mind Jesus' statement, when he is going to his crucifixion, he compares man's life to that of "a grain of wheat [...] But if it dies, it bears much fruit." (King James Bible, 1769/2008, John:12:24). Here, Jesus Christ conveys the necessity of death to bring better lives to others, hence, "we must die, if we want to live." The poet may ask his people to follow Christ's steps to die for the sake of their own glory and the glory of their nation.

Blacks are elevated in the poem. They are the victims whose endurance and patience like that of Job in the Bible, "But now they mock me, men younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to put with my

sheepdogs." (King James Bible, Job 30:1). As young people ridiculed Job in the Bible, the whites mocked the blacks in the poem. Besides, whites are presented in the poem as "mad hungry dogs." In the Bible, the dogs are displayed as wild aggressive animals (Whitekettle, 2001, p. 345), similarly, Mckay underestimates and despises whites and presents them as "monsters." The poet conceives that the atrocity and cowardice of whites should be defeated by blacks' adaptation to victorious death as a means of salvation and restoring freedom.

4. Alice Walker's "Torture"

Alice Walker was born in 1944, she belongs to another generation of black resistance. She is a supporter of feminism and an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, which became stronger in the 1950s and 1960s. Walker raised in the epoch of Jim Crow Laws, which advocated segregation and racial prejudice. From the racial riots of the Red Summer to the present day racism was deep rooted in the American society. Through her literary work, Walker strives for the equality and freedom of the African American people.

In her poem "Torture," Walker shows the barbarity of whites and how they subjugate and torture each member of a black family:

*When they torture your mother
plant a tree
When they torture your father
plant a tree
When they torture your brother
and your sister
plant a tree (1-7)*

African American society is characterized by the strong bonds among family members. Family provides emotional upholding and guidance for its members. It constitutes the cornerstone of any society. The family is also considered the force of community cohesion, and has an effective role in building a normal, integrated society. The blacks' enemy attacks the backbone of the black community represented by the "mother," "father," "brother" and "sister." They torture the mother, who is the nurturer and the symbol of fertility and life. The father, who is an emblem of power and protection, is also tormented. Additionally, the brother and sister, who represent solidarity and empowerment, become subject to misery. Black Americans faced

different types of sever torture methods. They were tortured physically and mentally. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, lynching was practiced by white people to terrify and abuse blacks. Innocent black people were hanged from trees, they suffer from "extreme brutality, such as torture, mutilation, decapitation, and desecration. Some victims were burned alive." ("History of Lynching," n.d., para.2)

Nevertheless, the poet asks the oppressed people to resist torture and violence by "plant[ing] a tree." Walker adopts the culture of nonviolence and the politics of peaceful resistance. The principle of nonviolence, also known as "nonviolent resistance," rejects the use of physical violence to achieve social or political change. This form of social struggle, often described as "ordinary people's politics," has been embraced by masses of people around the world in campaigns for social justice. It seems that Walker has embraced the doctrine of Martin Luther King, a theologian, political activist and a prominent leader in the Civil Rights Movement, who advocated nonviolent confrontation. For him, nonviolent resistance is "a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love" (King, 1958, 80). King believed that the Christian doctrine of love is "a powerful force for social change" (King, 79). Similarly, Walker rouses blacks to confront the foe's torment peacefully. The weapon of their resistance is planting a tree, which is a symbol of development, expansion, persistence and power. The roots of the tree are associated with belonging and stability. Planting a tree can also be a reference to Toussaint L'Ouverture's words, leader of the Haitian independence movement during the French Revolution: "*In overthrowing me, you have overthrown only the trunk of the tree of negro liberty; but the roots remain; they will push out again, because they are numerous, and go deep into the soil*" (qtd. in Young et al., 2012, 85). Thus to plant a tree means asserting the African American identity for it cannot be obliterated.

Walker's means of resistance can also be an indication to the Tree of Liberty, under which the American protesters gathered to resist the British occupation in the 1760s. It became an emblem of the American revolution that led to America's independence. Hence, the poet wants to convey that by planting a tree, blacks are cultivating the seeds of their own revolution and freedom. The poet encourages the nonviolent resistance even if the enemy kills the prominent figures in black community, "When they assassinate your

leaders/ plant a tree" (8-9). Here, she refers to the assassination of two powerful leaders and activists in the Civil Rights Movement; Malcolm X, who was assassinated in 1965 and Martin Luther King, who was killed in 1968.

For every torment and pain, the abused person plants a tree, and because of the abundance of torture and suffering, a forest is formed. However, the death of the leaders and the cut of the trees themselves would not stop the black's resistance for they keep on planting trees:

*When they begin to torture
the trees
and cut down the forest
they have made
start another. (16-20)*

Black Americans derive their continuity and renewal from their peaceful struggle. The continuity of tree planting reflects their preservation of resistance. The commitment to a peaceful resistance that the poet calls for, reflects the wisdom and endurance that black people possess. In this poem, blacks are presented as undefeatable people since the torture and agony have made them stronger. They are like trees cannot be perished since they have the power of resilience and regeneration.

Conclusion

Through the poems "If We Must Die" and "Torture," McKay and Walker articulate their own perception of resistance. Both poems display the blacks' adversity and ordeal and their determination to achieve freedom and to preserve dignity. Each of McKay and Walker belongs to a different era of struggle, yet, they have the same goals, hopes and dreams of civil rights. Their aim is to create a constant, respected and fortified life. The focus on resistance stems from a deep faith in the blacks' right to achieve liberty and equality at economic, social, political educational levels.

Each poem reveals the poet's ideology of resistance. McKay witnessed the storm of anger and violence that occurred in the Red Summer, when racism was at its peak, as thousands of black people murdered and tortured and experienced displacement as well as deprivation. Consequently, the cry of resistance in "If We Must Die," is violent. McKay appears in the poem as

an integral part of the black masses that are subjected to humiliation and persecution, and this was confirmed by his use of the pronouns "we" and "us" as well as the employment of the word "kinsmen." Therefore, the poet seems loaded with wrath that exploded in the form of a call for fierce and armed resistance.

On the other hand, Walker lived in a period of racism that was somewhat less severe than the racial hatred at the beginning of the twentieth century. so she appears in "Torture" as a preacher and advisor to blacks through the use of the imperative verb "plant." unlike Mckay, the use of the pronoun "your" puts her away from the scene of torture and turns her to an observer. Walker was a contemporary of Martin Luther King, an influential black leader of the peaceful resistance. She advocates his doctrine of resistance and calls for nonviolent struggle. Hence, her doctrine of resistance differs from that of Mckay.

However, both poems portray blacks as more civilized people than their brutal oppressors, the whites. They behave humanely, defending their rights without extremism, and their resistance is a natural reaction to defend themselves and their rights.

The doctrine of resistance enables African Americans to accomplish victory and gain their civil rights. Barack Obama's election and presidency for two terms in the United States, for example, is best evidence for the black's triumph. Bigotry is less extreme in contemporary America. Most of the blatant individual actions that indicate racism are no longer acceptable in the mainstream of contemporary American society. Nevertheless, American blacks still resist and struggle for a better life.

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