



## FROM MARGIN TO CENTRE: THE JAMAICAN MODEL OF A “THIRD WORLD SUPERSTAR”

PAUL POTTAKKARAN

Guest Lecturer, St. Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Kerala



Article Received:10/11/2020

Article Accepted: 04/12/2020

Published online:09/12/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.4.144](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.4.144)

### Abstract

Bob Marley is known all-over the world as a singer and a musician. But the depth of his music and resistance remains unfathomed. This study is an attempt to perceive Marley's works with an understanding of his personal life as well as the colonial life of Africa. The paper also discusses Bob's life, his "mulatto" lineage, his Pan-African views, the colonial life of Jamaicans, the theme of diaspora and the way Marley uses music as a tool of resistance. His representation of the third world is a fine model for the rest of the marginalized. This paper discusses the need for an appraisal of the marginalized in several ethnic and cultural groups. The contemporary socio-political scenario in India demands greater representation of Dalit and other scattered marginalized groups in the mainstream. Marley's contributions are significant in this regard as he could present the pride of African community before the world.

Keywords: Music, resistance, marginalized, postcolonial, Dalit.

"All music, even the stylistically most individualistic, takes on a collective content: every single sound speaks in the plural."  
(Theodor Adorno)

Art is an expression formed by the artist's social and personal surroundings. Considering music as a popular art, musician acts as an agent of the society by whom the society speaks out to the rest of the world. Bob Marley once said that musicians must be spokespeople for the oppressed masses. Antonio Gramsci observes that ruling groups ideologically dominate a society through cultural forms. Over the ages, this has been a practice in the political power structures. Though we call it the Eurocentric approach in art, considering the colonizer's domination, similar hegemonic interventions could be traced out from different parts of the world under popular leaders during various periods of history. Even in Soviet Union, under the popular pro-left leaders, art was repressed. Bob Marley's resistance

towards colonization could be considered as a counter-hegemonic alternative. Learning the acceptance of popular culture in music during the 1960's, Marley addressed the West with his songs of freedom. He was countering the colonizers at their own lands. Had music not been his tool, his resistance would have not crossed the boundaries of Jamaica. Fischlin observes that the power of music to develop a counter-hegemonic culture is to be feared by those who are threatened by it, and celebrated by those who use it to resist oppression and liberate expression.

### The First Third World Superstar

Robert Nesta Marley was born on February 6, 1945, in Nine Mile, St. Ann, Jamaica, to a white father, Captain Norval Marley and a black mother, Cedella Booker. It was a period when neither the whites nor the blacks accepted the "brown stratum" or the "intermediate class". His "brown"

skin separated him from other boys of his age. The mulatto lineage grew him stronger and kindled the flames of revolution within him. The anti-mulatto prejudice was deeply rooted in the society by the time of Jamaican independence than ever before. Trench Town had a number of successful local musicians who inspired the budding musicians. Joe Higgs helped Bob improve his singing abilities. By a strange twist of fate, Bob met Peter Mc Intosh, another student of Higgs, who would later complete the trio along with Bob, and Bunny. During the late 60s, Bob was half-way up his career. Though the racial prejudices beleaguered, it seemed as if he did no more yield to them emotionally, but used it to strengthen his music. In 1962, Bob got his sound recorded for four songs. By the next year, he, along with Bunny Waiter, Peter Tosh, Jr. Braithwaite, Beverley Kelso, and Cherry Smith were named "The Teenagers". They later changed the name to "The Wailing Rudeboys" and then to "The Wailing Wailers". "The Wailing Wailers" soon became the big name "The Wailers" after they joined the big cheese producer Coxsone Dodd. The Band topped the charts regularly for years. Many artists and a couple of producers got involved with "The Wailers" meanwhile. But the trio remained the core of the group until 1974, when Bunny and Peter left in pursuit of solo careers. "The Wailers" was then baptized to "Bob Marley and The Wailers." By then, Bob had emerged as the 'first third world superstar'. His songs moved people, gave them the power to fight for free living. The tracks like *War*, *Get Up, Stand Up* and the albums *Catch a Fire* and *Burning*, all were power packs of revolution. It questioned the authority without compromising the quality of music which helped to reach out to the millions around the world. Bob's albums were chartbusters universally and this made his words and views popular. His songs addressed the marginalized and the discriminated; and were proclamations of freedom from within and the system. Be it the white or the upper class, the conqueror or the government, he advocated the audience to break the chains, for he was once chained. Bob's songs reverberated the pains of the blacks to the utmost clout. The socio-political imbalance in the third world was unveiled. He also called for the union of blacks and the downpressed

through his tracks *Zimbabwe*, *Africa Unite*, *Wake Up and Live* and *Survival*.

#### Pan Africanism

##### AFRICA UNITE (*Survival*, 1979)

Africa, Unite

'Cause we're moving right out of Babylon

And we're going to our father's land

How good and how pleasant it would be

Before God and man, yeah

To see the unification of all Africans, yeah

As it's been said already let it be done, yeah

We are the children of the Rastaman

We are the children of the Higher Man

So Africa, Unite cause the children wanna

Come home

Africa, Unite 'cause we're moving right

out of Babylon

And we're grooving to our father's land

How good and pleasant it would be

Before God and Man

To see the unification of all Rastaman, yeah

As it's been said already let it be done

I tell you who we are under the sun

We are the children of the Rastaman

We are the children of the Higher Man

So, Africa, Unite, Africa, Unite

Unite for the benefit of your people

Unite for it's later than you think

Unite for the benefit of your children

Unite for it's later than you think

Africa awaits its creators,

Africa awaiting its creators

Africa, you're my forefather cornerstone

Unite for the Africans abroad,

Unite for the Africans a yard

Africa, Unite.

*Survival* was one of the most popular albums by "Bob Marley and The Wailers". Most of the songs in the album, including "Africa Unite", are aimed at

bringing the black people together. The track is considered as an anthem for Pan-African solidarity. For Bob, Africa was not just a dream, but a place for the black men and women to live with dignity and prosperity. His Pan-African view aimed at the return of black population around the world to their Zion, the Africa. Another song from the album *Survival* expresses Bob's protest in a different way. Rastafarians considered themselves as the Israel in *the Bible*, who sail through sufferings to reach God. Bob, in this work, calls the white colonizer's land, the Babylon and their systems, the 'Babylon System'. According to *the Holy Bible*, Babylon was a land where the subjects were pleasure-lovers and the God destroyed the land as a chastisement. Bob criticizes the colonizers for the cruelties to the Africans and reminds that the blacks would rebound with revolt. *Buffalo Soldiers* is a popular track by Marley, released posthumously. It represented the black US cavalry regiments who fought in the Indian War after 1866. The black troupes were named so by the native Americans, for whom they had been fighting. The African-Americans felt and looked like a buffalo's pelt. It was due to this physical feature that the tough soldiers were taunted by the natives. But they were tougher than what their down pressers thought. They embraced the name for they loved the buffalo's fierce bravery and fighting spirit. The song reminded The Africans about the Buffalo Soldiers who were made to fight in America. Bob claims that they were stolen from Africa and made to fight in another country.

### The Rasta

No study related to Bob Marley would be complete without taking a close look into his religious life and beliefs. He was an *aficionado* of the Rastafarianism, a religion that grew up from the slums of Jamaica during late 1920s. The Rastafarianism was not like any other religion that had strict rules and an organizational or institutional background. It was rather a movement based on biblical themes and African religious traditions. The movement had influenced the Jamaican political system too. Through Bob, it gained international recognition. As the Rasta was devoid of rules, there were many spiritual and moral variables within itself. For some Rastafarians, it was a way of life, but for the rest it was a religion.

Despite all the diversities, they were united by the belief in the messiah ship of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, the influence of Jamaican culture, resistance to oppression and pride in the African heritage. The movement was named after Ras Tafari Makonnen, who was crowned as Emperor Haile Selassie I. Their God, the Judeo-Christian God, was called Jah. They had a faith that was based on Judaism and Christianity. They anchored their beliefs on the Old Testament laws and prophecies and the Book of Revelation. This might be the basis of their belief that Jah was the manifestation of Jesus on earth, was black and was Emperor Haile Selassie. They did not believe in afterlife and considered Africa the heaven, which they called the Zion. On the other hand, they called the white man's land, the Babylon, which according to the Holy Bible was cursed.

If Rasta was Bob's way of life, then reggae was nothing less than his life itself. It was the medium through which Bob connected himself to the world, especially the black community. He united them, inspired them and advocated them to come back to their homeland. His songs empowered them and kindled the flames of nationality within them. His music expressed the suffering, spirit and hope of the under pressed. They were wake up calls for a community that was divided by the white man's power and dominance. His lyrics carried the pains of slavery wiped off by the black man's spirit that never gave up. He conveyed deep philosophies in simple and popular language which fitted well into the genre of music.

### Colonial Jamaica: A Cross-section of the Marginalized World

Jamaica was subject to colonization since the fifteenth century. Though the colonial masters changed the plight of the slaves was the same, till the royal abolition of the slave trade. During this period, the slaves were moved to different parts of the world by slave trades. This had far reaching consequences, as even after the abolition of slave trade and the independence of Jamaica, most of the slaves could not return to their homeland. They had to live the lives of marginalized as they were among the whites. Marley protested against this racial discrimination too. Postcolonialism covers all the culture affected by

the imperial process from the movement of colonization to the present day. The post-colonial literature and other cultural productions, produced at any time after a nation's initial contact with a colonizer.

Though post colonialism emerged as a school of theory much later, it is rooted in the days of the decolonization project, the period closer to Marley's entry as a musician. His short life has witnessed slavery, imperialism, decolonization and the days after. This lived in experience was a major source of inspiration of him, along with his religious beliefs. But one cannot view his music and religious representation as separate activities as both aimed at freeing the oppressed. It was an Israel-Babylon confrontation for the Rastafarians as the core of *the Bible* rejects Euro-centrism which was the essence of African postcolonial arts also. Robin Xavier points out that Decolonization demands reclamation of one's cultural plot, its strategic use and finally a purgation of the culture after the end of colonialism. As suggested, a post-colonial work of art should essentially include the colonial life of the people and their sufferings aimed at bringing them into the forefront. Rejection of Euro-centrism thus becomes a tool in bringing the marginalized into the center of the society.

Postcolonial studies, though broader in its outlook, does not include all marginalized sections. There are several cultural and ethnic groups forming a huge but scattered section of the society. In India and several other countries in the sub-continent, there are various Dalit groups marginalized by caste and colour. When the post-colonial writers and artists address the mainstream in the colonizer's language, the various indigenous groups did not have common medium to communicate. The caste based social culture and order pushed the Dalits into margins. There was a conscious effort from the upper caste to deny education to them which resulted in the inability of Dalits to communicate to the rest of the world. Alok Mukherjee, in his translation of Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* says,

This is a major gap, given that much of the theorizing in India and abroad about Indian

literatures, culture and society, whether from Marxist, postcolonial or subaltern perspectives, has been in English. Only some of the theorists have drawn on materials from the regional languages, and even they have taken virtually no note of interventions by Dalits. (Mukherjee, 2004).

### Conclusion

Bob Marley has become a celebrated name. Unfortunately, the world fails to understand the ideas and ideals that led to the emergence of such a renowned musician. His life, music and resistance is a model for the marginalized sections of the society. The Dalit movements in India are gaining immense pace from such models. They are moving towards the development of Dalit Aesthetics which rejects the upper caste interventions. They are daring to deny the 'discourses of pity'. Such denials and rejections are signs of a growing aesthetics with strong base on Dalit culture and identity. Harish Narang writes, "since society-any society-is generally divided into a binary-'pro' or 'anti', 'for' or 'against'-a writer too has to make a choice between the responsibility of sliding with truth, justice and humaneness or standing in favour of exploitation and injustice ". (Narang, 2014). The development of Dalit theories and aesthetics are rays of hope towards a better representation of the marginalized not only in India but from the rest of the world also.

### Works Cited

- Mukherjee, Alok. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Orient Black swan Private Limited, 2004.
- Singha, Sankar Prasad, and Indranil Acharya. *Towards Social Change Essays on Dalit*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2014.
- Boot, A. and V. Goldman. 1982. *Bob Marley: Soul Rebel-Natural Mystic*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Xavier, Robin. *The Methodology of Literature*. Chennai: MainSpring Publishers, 2015.
- Bob Marley Foundation.2005. "The story of Bob Marley". <http://www.bobmarley.com/life/story> (June 7, 2005).