The Reconstruction of the Black Slaves’ Plight in Marcy Heidish’s A Woman Called Moses

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Abstract: This article deals with black slaves’ critical conditions of life in the United States during slavery in Marcy Heidish’s A Woman Called Moses. It purports to demonstrate that after being ill-treated for many years by white masters on plantations, black slaves have started to express their discontents to their masters through complaints and some acts of rebellion as a way to freedom denied to them because of their position as slaves in a world ruled by Whites. The author’s reconstruction of the black slaves’ such plights evidences the historical dimension of her novel.

Key words: Plight, Black slaves, Masters, Slavery, History, and Fiction.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start this analysis on Marcy Heidish’s A Woman Called Moses by giving a brief explanation of the words “Plight” and “Moses” which might seem somehow obscure to some readers. The first is linked to black slaves’ all forms of victimization by their white masters in the United States during slavery. The second is a direct reference to a black woman named Harriet Tubman born in Maryland, Dorchester County around 1820, and known as a ‘Moses’ thanks to her role as a conductor of the Underground Railroad. Like Moses in the Bible, precisely in the Book of Exodus, who freed the Hebrews from enslavement in Egypt, Harriet Tubman has provided many black slaves with freedom by taking them from the South to the North of the United States considered by most of them as the Promised Land. It is indeed in this regard that she is called ‘Moses’. The novel is based on the life of this protagonist who does not only embodies the whole black community because of the treatments inflicted on her by her white masters and mistresses, but also shows the intertwining between history and fiction in the author’s narrative. What I find interesting in this study is especially what this novel owes to black slaves’ plight and how much this plight may have inspired the author. This means that I want to point to a few aspects of A Woman Called Moses that seem to me to constitute a kind of interplay between history and Heidish’s imagination. Because the novel’s structure is built on the black slaves’ enslavement, I will begin this discussion by examining the slaves’ ill-treatment by their white masters. Then, I will study the black slaves’ complaints and rebellion as a way to freedom.

1. THE REFERENCE TO THE BLACK SLAVES’ ILL-TREATMENTS

In Heidish’s A Woman Called Moses, the black slaves’ ill-treatments by their white masters appear in different forms. While some are simply blamed and punished when they are mistaken, others are either sold or killed, because masters are fed up with their way of behaving. For example, one sees how a character named Tilly is suffering even at the moment she is sold just like an object:

Tilly was roped around the waist to the other children, the grown slaves in a double row, bracelated and linked together with metal that gave off a dull kind of beautiful sheen. And then I comprehend. But it couldn’t be real (p. 10).

In this passage, Tilly’s suffering is evidenced by the way she is “bracelated and linked with metal”. The passage recalls the tortures prevailing on plantations during slavery. The black slaves’ ill-treatment is excessive that the author continues to account for it through the character of Harriet Tubman who is profoundly shocked when she sees her master selling his slaves like goods:

During the lean times when I was small, when the price of wheat and corn was dropping, and the tobacco planting were commence to ruin large stretches of soil in Maryland, it appeared Marse Ed meant to get himself through by breeding and selling off slaves instead of crops (p. 9).

Through this passage one understands that black slaves are considered as their masters’ properties, and as such are prohibited to take any
decision without their masters’ allowance. This makes sense because slaves being properties of their masters can be sold at any time by the latter, as evidenced by Goodell:

A slave is the one who is the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him; dispose of his person, his industry and his labor. He can do nothing, posses nothing nor acquire anything, but what must belong to his master (Goodell: 1853, 23).

This passage makes it clear that for white masters, selling slaves is a legal trade. This means that for them, “it is not considered as an inhuman practice as viewed by Blacks who are victims of it” (Nzambi: 2016, 1055). Such ill-treatments viewed as the black slaves’ nothingness on the American soil can also be seen through the following dialogue about the price to buy Harriet Tubman. Obviously, the dialogue confronts Harriet Tubman’s master who is a seller and another white master who wants to buy her:

Well, here she is, name your price. Why, she’s not worth a six pence, you must be plumb crazy, Edward. She’s so weak and scrawny. I wouldn’t think of buying her. [...] Your price, sir? She was one of the strongest wenches I had before this unfortunate mishap and will be again (pp. 42-43).

The utterance “she’s so weak and scrawny” shows that Harriet Tubman is a slave who cannot be bought the same price as those who physically appear stronger than her. For buyers, weak slaves are very profitable to them, because they are unable to increase their production on plantations. This kind of life experienced by black slaves during slavery pushed some of them to confess that there was no difference to make between field slaves and household ones. For, the treatment was quite the same, and that there was no choice to make between both kinds of slaves, as evidenced by Harriet Tubman who states:

House servant, field hand, it appeared to make no difference which one I was after all. I brooded on that revelation during three more seed times, my body moving over the work, my mind spinning off on its own. I came up into early womanhood troubled, restless, but aimlessly so. (p. 36).

One understands that there is no difference at all between field slaves and domestic ones, because both categories of slaves are victims of wrongful treatments by their white masters who take them for granted. The author’s use of this passage is indicative, for it draws the reader back to what really happened to Blacks during slavery, as the historian Gates writes:

House servant cared for the house and they cooked the meal, slaughtered the meat drove the carriages, and were personal servant to the master and his mistress of the household (Gates: 2003, 55).

This passage shows that being a household is not a privilege or a good occupation, for households are always slaving as they are condemned to do the housework every day. Heidish’s efforts to account for black slaves’ ill-treatments during slavery become very evident in the passage in which she tells of black slaves who are deprived not only of education, but also of several rights:

All our gatherings were forbidden unless a white man was present. All drumming, jubilee-beating, or rousing noise was forbidden. All our passes to town or other plantations were stopped. All books, tracts, and Bibles were banned from us. Anyone teaching a slave to read would be jailed. Any pair of slaves congregating would be lashed. The door was wrenched off the privy. The fields were watched. The roads were watched. We were watched, wherever we were, whatever we did (p. 35).

This passage evidences the Whites’ urge to keep black people in a total ignorance of intellectual notions, as a way to keep them inferior to them. It is indeed with regard to this aim that Frederick Douglass, a former slave recalls the way his mistress’s husband reacts when he surprises his wife teaching him how to read:

If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world... if you teach that nigger how to read there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be as slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontent and unhappy (Douglass: 1845, 49).

The ill-treatments inflicted on black slaves by their white masters who always consider them as their own properties are also evident through the author’s mention of the quality of food they usually eat on the plantation:

Time and time again we used to hear Mama Rit set folks laughing with her stories, one in especial that she seemed to favor. It was about a slave who told his master all the hogs on the place had died from a sickness called Malletitis, and Old Master, believing the meat would be tainted, gave the dead hogs to his darkies for eating (pp. 15-16).
One understands that during slavery black slaves were not well fed and that many of them were dying because of their bad and poor nutrition. Their masters could even give them something that was spoilt to eat, and as there was no choice to make, slaves were doomed to eat it and see what would happen next.

The novel also reads that slaves are subjected to heavy loads. These loads attest of their plight in a world ruled by Whites who force them to work full time on the plantation without any significant rest, as evidenced by Harriet Tubman who expresses herself in these terms:

We’re working late into the night clearing up wheat, stuffing it into sacks, and there’s frenzy about the task; so much wheat, so many sacks to fill (p. 41).

Heidish’s mention of this passage is a way to draw the reader back to the history of the United States, for one knows that Harriet Tubman was a real person and a conductor in the Underground Railroad. The phrase “so many sacks to fill” makes it clear that, black slaves can only stop working when all the sacks given to them by their white masters are filled up. If these sacks are not filled, they will be punished or whipped by their masters who think that Blacks cannot be tired even though they have worked hard. Similarly, a former slave named Solomon Northup also gives his testimony related to the painful life he experiences on plantations:

The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with exception of ten or fifteen, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it is until the order to halt is given by the driver (Northup: 1853, 167).

The description of the black slaves’ experience of life made in this passage really shows that Blacks are not only regarded as beasts or animals, but also and mostly as machines which can work from morning to the middle of night without stopping. This wrong attitude of white masters over black slaves shows how the latter are doomed to sufferings. It is indeed in this regard that some slaves prefer death to life, as Evayoulou writes:

The slave subjected to the rigours of the plantation life, and broken by hard work, sometimes prefers death to his life as a slave (Evayoulou: 2010, 219).

One may also discover that the black slaves’ medical care is not of good quality on the plantation. Masters do not really care about their slaves’ health. Confronted with such a reality, slaves manage to take care of themselves by using their traditional medicines inherited from their ancestors, as evidenced by Harriet Tubman who tells of Aunt Juba pictured as a good healer thanks to her use of traditional medicines:

People said Aunt Juba had the gift far ‘sight, she was wise, and more than just a granny – midwife. She could cure ailing folks like no white doctor or nigger conjure man was able (p. 11).

This quotation demonstrates that during slavery, Blacks were not cared in hospitals, but traditionally as they used to do in Africa. In this novel Aunt Juba is the healer in charge of all black slaves suffering from any sickness.

The ill-treatment inflicted on black slaves has no distinction in terms of sex or age. Even male or female children are involved in this harsh treatment on the plantation because of their position as black slaves’ sons or daughters. In the novel, one sees how Harriet Tubman begins to work as a slave since her childhood in her master’s house before she is sent on the plantation:

I must have been about seven years old then mostly children never got to see coffee-gangs, but I’d been running through the woods looking for my sister, came out at the rolling road, and nearly stumble into one (p. 9).

This wrongful experience of Blacks on the American soil that the author retraces does not derive from her own imagination, but is a true fact of history also reconstructed by other novelists like Margaret Walker who, in Jubilee, shows how a character named Aunt Sally is sold just like an object:

Goodbye, honey, don’t yall forget to pray. Pray God to send his chillums a Moses, pray to Jesus to have mercy on us poor suffering chillums. Goodbye, honey, don’t forget Aunt Sally and don’t forget to pray (Walker: 1966, 17).

Here, the name Aunt Sally is emblematic of the way white people used to name their slaves. Apart from conveying the saves’ desire of freedom prevailing among slaves during slavery, the writer also underscores the separation of slaves from their kin. This separation reinforces their sorrows, worries, cries, sufferings, and humiliations. For, it is a great shame for a human being to be sold like goods. What stands for a great shock to the slaves in this context is their awareness about their eternal separation. That is to say that “when one of them is sold, he no longer comes back; he becomes like a dead person who can never be seen again”
(Nzambi: 2016, 1054). The writer’s intention seems to draw the reader’s attention to the plight of black slaves and to associate the white man with evil. She, for example, depicts Gideon, a slave who is whipped and killed by the overseer just because he disobeys the master and decides to fight back to the overseer’s whip. This act does not only bring pain and suffering to him, but also costs his life, as a way to teach a lesson to the remaining slaves in case of disobedience:

He took one step toward McCracken, threw the whip down like for a dare, but the overseer just snatched it up, backed we didn’t see him for the rest of the day off, and that evening at quelling time Gideon went off by himself to close the pasture fence like always, but as he reached the gate he was surrounded by four white men who beat him with ax handles and a bull whip till he fell against the gate post dead (Walker, ibid., 33).

These forms of mistreatments and wrong view of Whites over Blacks strongly demonstrated by the novelist are, without any doubt, grounded in the black experience in the United States. For, these tortures, punishments, whippings, killings, and any other forms of Blacks’ victimization during slavery are described by American historians. As it can be seen, there are many dramatic events which attest not only of the white masters’ wrong view over black slaves, but also of the latter’s nothingness in a world ruled by Whites. In this regard, one may perhaps wonder how black slaves react to their ill-treatment by their white masters as a way to freedom.

2. THE BLACK SLAVES’ COMPLAINTS RECONSTRUCTED

This subtitle is indicative, for it purports to demonstrate how in the novel slave characters react to their status of inferiority given to them by white masters who control, handle, and provide them with the idea that their power to do whatever on Blacks is a gift from God. In Heidish’s A Woman Called Moses most of the slaves’ complaints are turned to God. They, for example, complain about the origin of slavery, because they have trouble to understand that the opportunity to be “masters” is only given to Whites and not to Blacks who are entitled to be “slaves”. The narrator clarifies this aspect through the character of Old Callie who teaches slave children that slavery comes from the will of God; it is not the white man’s fault:

Who give you a master and mistress? God give them to us.
Who say you got to obey them? God say we got to.
What make niggers so lazy? Our sinful hearts... (pp. 18-19).

This passage draws the reader back to the moment when Blacks used to think that being a slave is a fate for them; it is a decision from God. Here, one can say that they were ignorant individuals who could accept lies easily. And that this ignorance was to some extent the cause of their sufferings on the American soil. The utterance “our sinful hearts” may leave the reader with the idea that some slaves even believe that white people are sinless, and that they are the only ones who sin in this world. In Haley’s Mama Flora’s Family there is a similar indication about the origin of slavery. Slavery appears as a punishment inflicted to Blacks by God, because Ham, the son of Noah had laughed at his father and by so acting, God had sent him to Africa where he and his children had glorified false gods. As a result, all Ham’s generations had been punished by the true God, as evidenced in this passage:

Her gran’pa had told her the truth of it, when she was a little girl. Ham, the son of Noah, had mocked his father, and God had banished Ham to Africa. Ham and his children had forsaken God and worshiped false idols, and their children and their children’s children and all the generations must atone for that great sin, and pay for it with blood and suffering. It was the reason that God had allowed Ham’s descendants to be taken into slavery, her gran’pa said. Forgiveness would come only when all the descendants of Ham had embraced Jesus. He told Flora she must love Jesus and fear God, to help the black people on their great journey to repentance (Haley: 1999, 15).

This story told to Flora by her grandfather shows that since the time of African ancestors, black people believed that slavery was not the white man’s attempt to dominate or torture Blacks, but simply a fate from God, the Almighty. With this belief, the idea of challenging Whites who put it into practice is really out of their mind. They really think that God is the only one to ban slavery, and they believe that a day will come for their forgiveness.

Black slaves’ lack of education is another aspect linked to their complaints in the American society. In fact, the denial of education is a way for Whites to maintain Blacks in bondage and keep their supremacy over them. For, Whites are pictured as blessed people thanks to their education which enables them to act under the authority of God, as Frederick Douglass, a former slave brings evidence in the following terms:

I saw that slaveholders would gladly made [sic] me believe that they were merely acting under the authority of God, making a slave of me, and in making slaves of others; and I treated them as robbers and deceivers (Douglass: 1855, 161).
As it can be seen, the main purpose of Whites to use the Bible was not to enable black slaves to discover the true God, but to maintain them in the ignorance of their rights as human beings. They did all their best to blind slaves in order to continue having an absolute power on them. This ignorance was not the black slaves’ fault, for they were not educated. And education was a powerful means used by Whites to handle Blacks, because they were the only people who could read and write, and as such they could only have access to the Bible which is the Holly book in which everything is said to be found. The use of the Bible helped white people maintain black slaves under their authority. They kept them in ignorance of their status by hiding themselves under the name and the word of the Almighty. But despite their attempt to accuse God to be accomplice in their wrongful situation in the American society, slaves still complain to Him. For, they know that He remains the best Master on whom they can rely. For example, Harriet Tubman believes that her master’s death is the result of her daily prayers to God. She thinks that God has heard her complaints. That is why he has allowed this mourning event to happen. For her, this death is a punishment given to her master by God for mistreating his servants. The author describes the master’s death in a very small passage when she writes:

Kill him, kill him, kill that man dead. And then I hear them say it: The words cut across the stuffy air to my pallet, Marse Ed gone. He’d died at table halfway through dinner, choked by a chicken bone caught in his throat, dead in two minutes flat (p. 44).

This passage attests not only of the master’s death which for Harriet is the result of his daily sins originated from the punishments he used to give to his slaves, but also of the way Harriet has prayed to God to kill him mercilessly. For, the repetition of the phrase “kill him” shows Harriet’s desire to see her master dead. In this regard, she recollects her own prayer of forgiveness to the Lord as she recognizes having prayed to punish her master:

Lord? Lord I did it, I wished it on him. Wicked though he was, I’d no right to take a life, and I did, willed one away, oh have mercy on me Lord. Cleanse me of my sin, for I have done what is evil in Your sight, cleanse me and I’ll never have to do with killing, never, I swear. Cleanse me of blood-guilt, wash me with snow, turn Your face away from all my sins, and blot out all my guilt. I will rave my regrets in this fever forever, I’ll offer myself up to You as fever itself, a burnt offering, fever me, forgive me (id.,).

As it can be noticed, most of the slaves’ complaints about their awful situation on the American soil are turned to God. They believe that God is the only one able to get them out of bondage. In fact, one sees how slaves devote their time to praying as a way not only to express their complaints to God, but also to fight for freedom denied to them by Whites. Black slaves are aware of their masters’ motto which consists in saying that a child born by a slave woman must be reduced to the conditions of his mother. This reality pushes Harriet’s mother to complain to God in the following terms:

One way or other I lose my children. It is only I. I don’t like to see my girl headed for hard times. With you always. I don’t want you gone babe, they’d catch you don’t head for hard times, one way or other I lose my girl (…). Oh Lord God, why do we birth these children, for what? (p. 92).

This passage suggests that women are so shocked to see their children and perhaps they grandsons and granddaughters face the same enslavement. That is why they think that it is useless for them to bear children. The interrogation “for what?” shows this uselessness to give birth to children who will never enjoy the full fruition of life, but will simply suffer like their mothers.

The black slaves’ complaints are also evident in the passage in which the author depicts the task given to slaves by their white masters on plantations. This task is to be accomplished with no condition even though they are tired. They have to work from morning to night until they fill many sacks to satisfy the need of their masters, as evidenced by Harriet Tubman in these terms:

We’re working late into the night cleaning up wheat, stuffing it into sacks, and there’s a frenzy about the task; much wheat, so many sacks to fill, and that grain must go to market at sunup (…). We go on at a dragging pace, heads nod, hands appear to be moving on their own (…). Three hours to dawn and we still work, some folks dozing, grain spilling from loose-wristed hands (p. 41).

What makes slaves complain more about their awful situation on plantations is the fact that they work without any rest and reward. The work takes place at every moment regardless of the quality of the weather. Be it good or bad, they are doomed to work to satisfy their masters’ needs.

As it can be seen, all these complaints lead the reader to understand that black slaves are fed up with bondage and that they want to end with it. Despite their complaints to God, slaves realize that all their complaints sound nothing that they prefer to react in diverse ways to fight for their freedom. This means that the exploration of the black slaves’
plight in the United States during slavery cannot be limited to what I have just demonstrated. I aim it to be extended to the theme of the black slaves’ rebellion against their white masters.

3. SOME ASPECTS OF THE BLACK SLAVES’ REBELLION AGAINST THEIR MASTERS

Being insulted, blamed, punished, whipped, and killed for many years on plantations and everywhere in America, black slaves become tired of living under the rule of white masters who never have mercy on them. They want to be free in order to build their own lives not in a racist country, but in a world where they will be considered as human beings with all rights and facilities. This common objective pushes them to do whatever they can to get freedom. Many slaves resist their masters in small ways. They sometimes break or hide tools, work slowly, claim to be sick, and disobey their masters. In A Woman Called Moses, Marcy Heidish depicts this aspect through the character of Harriet Tubman who becomes very stubborn and insolent just after the selling of her sister, Tilly:

I didn’t care. I just wanted to be outside where I felt the folks, and faraway [...] from that evil man who’d sold my sister. That was what I concluded, what I expected too (p. 20).

Harriet Tubman’s use of the expression “evil man” here shows that the way masters consider slaves as goods which can be sold at any time in order to make money, is very inhuman. For Harriet, it is an abomination to sell a human being that is at the order of living under the rule of white masters who never have mercy on them. They want to be free in order to build their own lives not in a racist country, but in a world where they will be considered as human beings with all rights and facilities. This common objective pushes them to do whatever they can to get freedom. Many slaves resist their masters in small ways. They sometimes break or hide tools, work slowly, claim to be sick, and disobey their masters. In A Woman Called Moses, Marcy Heidish depicts this aspect through the character of Harriet Tubman who becomes very stubborn and insolent just after the selling of her sister, Tilly:

I didn’t care. I just wanted to be outside where I felt the folks, and faraway [...] from that evil man who’d sold my sister. That was what I concluded, what I expected too (p. 20).

The novel also reads that a character named Gideon shows his opposition to the overseer, Mc Cracken when he takes a whip forward the later to defend himself, as evidenced by this passage:

He too one step toward McCracken, threw the whip down like for a dare, but the overseer just snatched it up, backed off, and we didn’t see him for the rest of the day (p. 33).

This quotation shows that Gideon is fed up with all the ill-treatments inflicted on black slaves by their white masters. What he does here has astonished the overseer, because no slave has done it before. Similarly, Jane Pittman in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman depicts this kind of rebellion through her mother when she states:

My mama told the overseer, you might try, I’m go’n do it. ‘Pull up that dress’. The overseer said. ‘You the big man, pull it up’. My mama said (Gaines: 1971, 28).

Through this quotation, one sees how Jane’s mother with the need of being recognized as a person who has identity, defeats the overseer when she goes on him as to fight against him: “And he hit her with stick. She went on him to choke him and he hit her again” (id.).

One of the aspects of the black slaves’ rebellion against their masters is the putting of fire on the masters’ houses. Heidish reconstructs this form of rebellion through the narrator who argues: “A slave-preacher called Nat Turner had raised an army of bondsmen just over to Virginia and slaughtered maybe hundred Whites in one night’s time” (p. 34). Through this quotation, the author reconstructs an actual historical event. For, one knows that “Nat Turner” was a prophet, and according to the vision he received from God, he was the one who would lead the great movement of black slaves to freedom. In 1831 he organized a bloody rebellion to free slaves from bondage as he did to himself when he escaped from his master’s plantation. The author’s reconstruction of this former black slave attests of the historical dimension of her novel.

Black slaves present many actions of rebellion against their white masters in different ways. They, for example, do the contrary of their masters’ instructions, or make actions that lead their masters to be angry and become worse to them than before. Harriet Tubman shows this form of resistance when she tells a story about her own experience at Mrs. Cook’s house where she is hired:

I carded her wool all wrongs, got in the way, played dumb, and the women would slope me, cussing me out with a variety of names. Shit-brained nigger was the mildest of them, as remember (p. 21).

These forms of demonstrations and insults hurled at Blacks are not the authors’ inventions, but actual historical situations which happened to Blacks during slavery. For, Julius Lester in To Be a Slave (1968) through the character of Lou Smith depicts a woman who had seven children that were sold by her master at the age of two. When she got her fourth baby she finished up killing him as she did not want him to be sold like the others:

When her fourth baby was born and was about two months old… she said, I just decided I’m not going to let ol’ master sell this baby; he just ain’t going to do it. She got up and gave it something out of a
This action although viewed as a sin from this woman slave, can be half understood, for it shows that mothers do not want their children to bear the same burden as they do. This form of resistance leaves black slaves with the hope to be free one day.

Another aspect linked to the black slaves’ rebellion against their white masters is their attempt to escape from plantations to the forest or the North of the United States where they hope to enjoy freedom. This reality is evidenced by Harriet Tubman who reveals her intention to escape in these terms:

*Well, ain’t you mad over nothing? You the one set to run off. My own good sense makes me want to run. I got that sense when they sold my daddy years past (...). Don’t have much more time outside tonight, your mama got her eye pealed to us* (p. 39).

The author’s use of the verb “to run” shows that Harriet Tubman is thinking about how to get herself out of bondage in order to lead her life freely. This desire is viewed not only as the result of the slaves’ unsuccessful complaints to God, but also as a way for Harriet to avenge his sold father. In fact, with the discovery of the Underground Railroad, she escapes from her master’s plantation to reach the North wrongly considered as the Promised Land by Blacks. One observes her departure through “farewells” she gives to her Kinsmen in this way:

*I’m bound to leave you. Bound for Jordan’s other side (...). Oh Daddy, sorry, got to even so, waited too long. I’m sorry friends to leave you. Farewell oh farewell…* (p. 96).

It is clear that Harriet Tubman’s dream of running away is realized and she prefers to let her friends know about it as she knows that she will never come back. This farewell repeated twice here shows the affection that the narrator has for the other slaves, but she cannot help going because escaping is their common objective. Harriet decides then to escape from bondage through the Underground Railroad which actually does not exist. It is only the slaves’ way of speaking in code so as not to make their masters understand what their plan for freedom. The author through Harriet Tubman’s journey tries to describe an actual historical event which is the slaves’ escape through the Underground Railroad also recognized by the historian John Hope Franklin who writes: “Long before the Underground Railroad was an effective antislavery device, slaves were running away” (Franklin: 1947, 132).

Harriet Tubman’s escape brings evidence that black slaves are no longer ready to live in bondage. Her rebellion against her white masters expressed through escape shows that during slavery some slaves were fearless and ready to die for the Blacks’ cause. But, this escape appears as a difficult task for her, as shown in the following passage:

*When I told William I was finally going, he learned both elbows on his thick record book, and frowned. It was dangerous, he warned again. Once I entered a slave state I’d be considered bond, I could be sold back into slavery, I could be caught, killed* (p. 130).

William is right to give this piece of advice to Harriet because as an escaped slave, going back to the South is a total risk for her. She can eventually be killed or sold to another master as it is a common punishment for any runaway slave who is caught. But, Harriet does not fear the danger she would encounter despite William’s warning: “Had I given no thought to my personal safety? Had the idea of capture never entered my mind?” (id.,).

These interrogations put by the narrator show that being a conductor is a risky mission, but she does not mind the risks she runs when going back to the South to free her kinfolk. Her problem here is not to see how risky her mission is, but the devotion that she has to accomplish this mission is so important for her. In this regard, she begins her mission by first rescuing her family, as she states:

*The old folks would not be coming. I’d met Daddy Ben behind his cabin some hours before signaling to him with a song, and he stumbled out groping for me. Lord, how thin and brittle-boned he felt in my arms as he kissed me and touched my face, asking over and over if I was all right.* (p. 133).

One notices the use of songs as a code to signal fugitives, as taking the latter to the North is a secret mission for Harriet Tubman who must be so careful most of the time. This means that the songs sung by slaves when working on plantations are very meaningful, because they always convey a special message to the latter or their ancestors, as shown in this passage:

*I use a certain signal-song to wan folks that I was close by again [...] always the warning song was the same: Who’s that yonder dressed in red? I heard the angels singing. Looks like the children that Moses led. I heard the angels singing* (p. 153).

The use of song is a way of speaking in code in order to be more discreet. The narrator uses songs as a code because she knows that masters cannot “decode” what they say. She refuses to use a face to face communication or dialogue to avoid
being suspected by their white masters. Knowing that her task is so difficult to accomplish, Harriet manages to work with all kinds of helpful people from different areas so as to be successful in her mission:

I worked with trades people, market women, preachers, peddlers, roving barbers, and rich benefactors, and I used them. I used everyone who would be trusted to help my passengers with whatever might be given: Shelter or supper, money, medicines, blankets… (p. 142).

This passage shows that the narrator who is so willing to free her people through the secret route does not make it a concern of herself. She organizes the escape with the help of many other freedom liberators from different sectors with whom she develops a kind of relationship. In fact, the remembrance of the pains of slavery pushes other freed black slaves to engage in Harriet’s mission which attests of her rebellion against all white masters:

I had free Negroes for contact in Maryland, saw slaves help other slaves of again and again, and up North, in Anti-slavery Societies and the underground station” (id.,).

Harriet Tubman is thus viewed as a man; she is fearless and does not care about the warning given to black slaves who may pretend to escape as a way to express their rebellion against white masters. As a believer, she puts all her faith and hope in God, because she believes that He is the only one who handles her life daily:

Whenever the Lord sends a servant the way is prepared and the paths made straight until the serving is done, and the servant no longer needed. My end was never in my own hands anyways (p. 140).

One may confess that Harriet is really a Christian who acts according to the will of God. Regardless of her own danger, she organizes many trips from the South to the North to free her fellow black slaves. Her courage in this mission is even recognized by the historian Zinn who describes it throughout her work of fiction, but also by some abolitionists like John Brown who refers to the narrator’s talent in this way: “She is one of the best and bravest persons on this continent”.

This recognition pushes some people to go further giving her the title of a “heroine”, as shown here: “He is saying how much I’d done for my people. how many I’d liberated, again calling me the greatest heroine of the age” (p. 160). Harriet Tubman is then pictured as a great figure of the time thanks to the actions she accomplishes through the Underground Railroad. Such acts of rebellion against white masters as described by the author and checked in history, stand for the way all Blacks react to the treatment inflicted on them by their white counterparts on the American soil.

CONCLUSION

What is fore grounded in A Woman Called Moses is drawn from American history, especially when viewed as Harriet Tubman’s record of life. In fact, the narrator’s actions are absolutely within the logic of the historical Harriet Tubman’s life. The black slaves’ ill-treatments, the complaints, some acts of rebellion against white masters, and the search for freedom are conceptual tools which form historical core in Marcy Heidish’s narrative. The
protagonist’s escape from the plantation to the North of the United States and her role as a conductor in the Underground Railroad, indicate the encroachment of history upon fiction. Actually, the novel allows a glance to the real American period of slavery with Blacks victimized by their white counterparts because of their position as slaves.

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