

## Coleridge and “Slavery’s Spectres”

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### Abstract

*The issue of slavery and the slave trade was a burning topic during the Romantic period. The ebb and flow of the anti-slavery movement strangely followed the time line of the Romantic period in Britain. It started in late 1780s and officially ended with the 1833 act abolishing slavery. Most of the Romantic poets were radicals and they became part of the anti-slavery campaign and the discourse of slavery became an important part of their poetry. Coleridge started his poetic career with a prize winning Greek ode on slavery and joined the anti-slavery campaign in the last decade of the eighteenth century; wrote against slavery and opposed the racial formations of the time. However, towards the end of his career his attitude to race and slavery underwent a big transformation. The paper aims to trace Coleridge’s evolution from an Anti-slavery advocate to a reluctant apologist for racism and slavery.*

**Keywords:** Romanticism; Slavery; Race; Anglocentrism; Christocentrism

### ***1. Introduction: Slave Trade and Theories of Race***

The system of slavery was crucial to British trades in the North Atlantic. Huge numbers of slaves were transported to the Americas and the Caribbean islands, mainly to work in the sugar plantations. According to the estimate provided in *Cassell’s Companion to Eighteenth Century Britain* (Brumwell & Speck, 2001) the British merchants between 1660 and 1807 shipped three and a half million slaves (Brumwell & Speck, p. 352). The slaves were treated no better than the animals. The slavers justified their trade by pointing to the bestiality of the Africans. The Africans were argued to be a different species. The notorious slave owner Edward Long in his *History of Jamaica* (1774) and Charles White in his *Account of the Regular Gradation of Man* (1799) argued that the whites and blacks are two distinct species.

However, the theory of polygenesis went against the Christian concept of creation and therefore, concept of racial polygenesis gave way to the idea of racial hierarchy. There was the development of the idea that, though all are created by God, certain people have degenerated since. Blumenbach (1865) in *The Anthropological Treatises*, for example, argued that “the white was the primitive colour of mankind, since it was very easy for that to degenerate into brown but much more difficult for dark to become white” (p. 269). Blumenbach’s division of races according to the colour was not meant for defining the white as superior or the black as inferior, but his arguments were used by the imperialists and the colonialists and slavers to show the superiority of the whites, particularly because he argued that the white is the primitive colour. Other scientific or pseudo-scientific works helped in the dissemination of idea of racial hierarchy published during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle*, published in 44 volumes between 1749 and 1804, and was translated into English from 1780s onwards. He tried to establish a relationship between climate change and human condition. He thought that the environment acted directly on organisms through what he called “organic particles.” Charles White’s *An Account of the Regular Gradation of Man*, published in 1799, arranged the African and European in polar opposites. He placed Africans nearer to the brute creation (1799 p. 42). The environmentalist perspective was also taken up by John Reinhold Forster by in *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World* (1778). Another important figure in the development of racial science was Casper Lavater, whose *Physiognomical Fragments* (1775-88), *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789-98), and *Aphorisms on Man* (1788) exercised much influence upon the theories of race.

However, racial arguments came to be questioned as a strong anti-slavery current was coming to force as men like Anthony Benezet and Thomas Clarkson poured in their invectives against the slavers. The view that human beings are of many species and of different origins and the blacks are but degenerated white, was countered by these Anti-Slavery campaigners.<sup>1</sup> Benezet published his influential *Some historical account of Guinea, : its situation, produce, and the general disposition of its inhabitants, with an inquiry into the rise and progress of the slave trade, its nature and lamentable effects* in 1771 and criticised the exploitative tendency of the Europeans who destroyed the idyllic life of the inhabitants of Guinea. Thomas Clarkson in his “*An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*” (1788) opposed the idea of the Africans as subhuman and degenerate and made some effort to show the resourcefulness of the Africans. The pro-slavery and anti-slavery debate reached the highest pitch in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, precisely the time when the Romantic Movement was born. The issue of slavery and slave trade exercised great influence upon all aspect of life during this time, and it is tempting to quote Allan Richardson, who observes:

It would have been highly unlikely for any but the most isolated Briton to remain unaware of the slave-trade debate in the wake of the massive Abolition campaign of 1788-89, and difficult not to ponder one’s own stand on and potential implication in the slave system at a time when sugaring one’s tea had become politically significant act and the abolitionist emblem had become ubiquitous, adorning hairpins and snuff boxes bracelets and (of course) tea sets” (Darkness Visible, 1998, pp. 130-31).

Romantic poets were no exceptions and every one of them, was caught in the Abolitionist fervour of the day. Blake, Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth embarked on their poetic career precisely at a time when slavery was a burning issue and all of them wrote on slavery and the slave trade. Coleridge and Southey campaigned together in Bristol against the slave trade and wrote poems and essays opposing the slavery.

## **2. Coleridge’s Greek Ode on Slavery and the Anti-Slavery Discourse**

Although Coleridge’s anti-slavery campaign was closely bound up with Robert Southey’s, his involvement with the issue of slavery and the slave trade began two years before he met Southey when he wrote his Greek ode condemning slavery, “On the Wretched Lot of the Slaves in the Isles of Western India” in 1792.<sup>2</sup> He won the Brown Gold Medal for this poem. The West Indian slave trade was hotly debated in 1792, both in the parliament and in the Cambridge University Senate. In fact, it had been an issue of debate and discussion since Clarkson wrote his prize winning essay “Revelation of the horrors of slavery”.<sup>3</sup> The Greek ode was composed in the context of the anti-slavery campaign that took a definite shape after 1787 when Wilberforce’s tried to introduce the Abolition Bill in the parliament. Finally, Wilberforce was successful in introducing the bill only 1791, though it was defeated.

Although the Greek ode was Coleridge’s early composition, the ode thematically foregrounded all the major concerns that Coleridge was to deal with in his compositions opposing slavery. One of the themes Coleridge again and again returned to in relation to the issue of slavery was death as a way to liberty for the slaves. Coleridge depicts death as a welcome thing to the slaves, since death is the only means to procure them freedom. Thus, Coleridge portrays how death is received by the slaves not “with tearings of cheeks/or with lamentation, but, on the contrary/ with circles beating out the dance and with the joy of songs” (ll. 5-8). Later in a note to the poem “The Destiny of Nations” Coleridge referred to his Greek Ode while explaining the fate of the people of “Eboe, or Koromantyn” as they were forced into slavery:

The Slaves in the West-Indies consider death as a passport to their native country. This sentiment is thus expressed in the introduction to a Greek Prize-Ode on the Slave Trade, of which the thoughts are better than the language in which they are conveyed. (CP p. 390)

<sup>1</sup> Robert Young in his book *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) does an excellent study of the racial constructions in the eighteenth century. He shows how the concept of different species of human beings were challenged by the Biblical origin of man, and how the pseudo- scientific writers like Blumenbach following the biblical account argued that white is the primitive colour and the other colours are but result of degeneration.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*. Ed. William Keach. Penguin: 1997. 330. The Greek ode is translated from the Greek by Anthea Morrison p.330 (appendix 1). All reference Coleridge’s poems will be to this volume unless otherwise mentioned.

<sup>3</sup> The essay was written in the year 1785 and Clarkson published it in pamphlet-form in 1786 as “An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African, translated from a Latin Dissertation.”

Another trope that is taken up by Coleridge in the poem is the suffering of the slaves in the hands of their cruel masters (“they groan with unspeakable grief” (l. 25). The speaker is appalled at the cruelty that human beings exercise upon the fellow men: “...what terrible things, being men, /they suffered from men” (ll. 16-17). The suffering of the slaves, as Coleridge envisions, is not only physical but also psychological since the physical torture becomes a trauma revisiting the slaves as nightmares: “the eyes of the /wretched ones fall asleep, but Fear never sleeps”( ll. 39-40). The poet attempts to draw the sympathy of the readers to the suffering of the slaves.

The poet moves on to another recurring trope in anti-slavery discourse: the trope of guilt. The slave traders are not only the bearer of the guilt but all those “who who feed on the persecution of the wretched, / wanton children of Excess, snatching your/brother’s blood” (Ll. 47-49). In his Lecture on the Slave Trade and elsewhere in his writing Coleridge would invoke the sense of shared guilt repeatedly. Another notable point is the reference to “Excess”. Coleridge thought that the root cause of slavery was the artificial wants for luxury products. The issue ‘artificial wants, was taken up by Coleridge in his Bristol lecture on the slave trade where Coleridge attacked rum and sugar , the two chief product from the West Indies as luxury goods and demanded their boycott. The poem is, therefore, reflective of future developments of Coleridge’s early involvement with the issue of slave trade.

Whenever the trope of guilt is invoked there emerges the issue of retribution and Coleridge refers to the instrument of retribution: “does not an inescapable Eye/ behold? Does not/Nemesis brandish fire-breathing/ requital? Do you hear? Or do you not hear?” (Ll. 49-51). The guilty will be judged and justice will be delivered through the invisible hand of God. The invocation of God’s retribution had been a very common theme in Anti-slavery poetic discourse and Coleridge follows the convention here.

The poem has another important element in the form of a panegyric to Wilberforce: “O! I see a Herald of Pity, his head shaded/with branches of olive! O! The golden joy of/thy words, Wilberforce, I hear!” (Ll. 61-63). Wilberforce was involved in active campaign in and outside the British parliament and Coleridge looked up to him as the liberator of the slaves and the poem ends with the hope that the trade will inevitably be abolished “...because/the Day of Slavery has already been stretched/too far” (Ll. 89-81).

### **3. *Pantisocracy: “Bliss on Transatlantic Shore”***

*After the Greek ode* there is no other notable composition by Coleridge opposing slave trade or slavery until he met Southey and they made their plan for the Pantisocracy. The friendship between Southey and Coleridge and their plan for setting up a community in America, and Coleridge’s visit to the port city of Bristol provided the context of his anti-slavery discourse in the last few years of the eighteenth century.

Therefore, Coleridge’s involvement with slave issue in this initial phase of his career needs to be analysed in relation to the Susquehana project. The direct link between the two projects (anti-slavery campaign and Pantisocracy) is the lecture against slavery that Coleridge delivered in Bristol in August 1795. It was a part of the group of lectures designed to raise fund for the success of Pantisocracy. However, the link between Coleridge’s ideas of the utopian project and his anti-slavery stand in the last decade of the eighteenth century was much deeper. The Pantisocracy scheme failed and the project failed due to a number of reasons: lack of fund, Southey’s journey to Portugal, Coleridge’s marriage, loss of enthusiasm etc. However, one of the prime causes of the failure was the difference in opinion between Coleridge and Southey regarding the status of two Negro servants Shad and Sally, whom they had endeared and wanted to take to America.

Pantisocracy was an attempt to escape from the oppressive regime and the corrupting political climate of Europe and England where the radical dreams of the poets could not be fulfilled. A utopian society based on the principle of equal government for all and a generalization of individual property was the product of Coleridge and Southey’s early radicalism. Two small poetic compositions by Coleridge on Pantisocracy centre on the conflict between a utopian idea Pantisocracy and the oppressive corrupt government at home. The sonnet entitled “Pantisocracy”(CP p. 66) contrasts the hopelessness and shame of living in England and the prospect of finding a dream space in the new continent:

No more endure to weigh  
The Shame and Anguish of the evil Day,  
Wisely forgetful! O’er the Ocean swell  
Sublime of Hope I seek the cottag’d Dell (Ll.2-5)

The prospect of settling in the trans-Atlantic land on the bank of Susquehanna fills his heart with “New Rays of Pleasance”(l. 14) . The other verse entitled “On the Prospect of Establishing a Pantisocracy in America” (*CP*, p. 66) more sharply focuses on the problems at home: ‘pale anxiety,’ ‘sad Despair’ ‘deepen’d Anguish’ strike the poet at home where ‘Despots’ imprison “the expanding ray /Of everlasting Truth” (7-8). Leaving this claustrophobic space he desires to settle in ‘other climes’ and wants to enjoy “Content and Bliss on Transatlantic shore” (l. 14). Coleridge shared the same sense of anguish that in the years of 1794 and 1795 the young English radicals felt. Simultaneously, the poems reflect a search for the lost ideals, an “Albion in her happiest times” (l. 10). It is important to note here that the ideal society Coleridge imagines is the ‘lost England’ that would be recuperated on the bank of Susquehanna.

The poems do not have any reference to the issue of slavery but the basic principle of pantisocracy involved an opposition to the pro-slavery discourse and any form of slavery. The society based on the principle of ‘Aspheterism’, and ‘Pantisocracy’, for Coleridge, had no place for the servants let alone slaves (Mc Kuisick “‘Wisely Forgetful’). The Pantisocracy scheme had its own inner contradictions, and as James Mc Kuisick points out, on principle it was based on equality but few problematic issues were there. Firstly, they imagined the land to be uninhabited, blank and therefore, they were forgetful of the native inhabitants. Secondly, in their own society they could not resolve the question of the position of women. Thirdly, both Coleridge and Southey agreed to take Shad and Sally to America yet they could not agree to their precise status.

The issue of keeping the slaves as servants led to the ultimate failure of the friendship between Southey and Coleridge and the abandonment of the project. Miss Tyler had two Negro servants Shad and Sally. Both of the poets agreed to take them to America but they differed on their precise position and role in the society. Southey wanted them to continue as servants but Coleridge felt there should be no servants. Coleridge wrote in a letter to Southey on September 18, 1794 and emphatically expressed his thoughts: “SHAD GOES WITH US. HE IS MY BROTHER!”(*LSTC*, Vol. 1. 77).<sup>4</sup> In another letter to Southey (21 October 1794), Coleridge expressed his vexation at Southey’s proposal regarding Shad and Sally: “I was vexed too and alarmed by your letter concerning Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, Shad, and little Sally. I was wrong, very wrong, in the affair of Shad, and have given you reason to suppose that I should assent to the innovation”( *LSTC*, Vol. 1. 82) Coleridge’s objection was to the proposal that Shad and Sally “perform that part of labor for which their education has fitted them.” “The leading idea of pantisocracy” Coleridge wrote, “is to make men necessarily virtuous by removing all motives to evil—all possible temptation” ( *LSTC*, Vol. 1. 82). Southey’s proposal had this temptation to evil. Coleridge further admonished Southey on the issue in another letter written in November:

My feeble and exhausted heart regards with a criminal indifference the introduction of servitude into our society; but my judgment is not asleep, nor can I suffer your reason, Southey, to be entangled in the web which your feelings have woven. Oxen and horses possess not intellectual appetites, nor the powers of acquiring them. We are therefore justified in employing their labour to our own benefit: mind hath a divine right of sovereignty over body. But who shall dare to transfer “from man to brute” to “from man to man”? To be employed in the toil of the field, while we are pursuing philosophical studies—can earldoms or emperorships boast so huge an inequality? Is there a human being of so torpid a nature as that placed in our society he would not feel it? *A willing slave is the worst of slaves! His soul is a slave.* Besides, I must own myself incapable of perceiving even the temporary convenience of the proposed innovation. (*LSTC*, Vol. 1. 89, emphasis added)

#### 4. “Lecture on the Slave Trade”

Similar ideas regarding slavery were expressed elsewhere by the poet. Coleridge was speaking against any form of slavery in his personal correspondence with Southey as well as in his “Lecture on the Slave Trade” (delivered on June 16, 1795). The lecture not only condemns the cruelty of slavery but also recognizes the intellectual ability of the Africans. He regarded the Africans as equal to the Europeans in their intellectual capacity without the accompanying vices. Coleridge observes that the Africans are as culturally improved as the Europeans are, but they are without the corruption and vice of the Europeans:

<sup>4</sup> S T Coleridge. Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Ed. Coleridge, Ernest Hartley. Vol. 1. Project Gutenberg, 2014. 2 vols. Henceforth will be referred to as *LSTC*.

The Africans, who are situated beyond the contagion of European vice—are innocent and happy – the peaceful inhabitants of a fertile soil, they cultivate their fields in common and reap the crop as the common property of all. Each family like the peasants in some parts of Europe, spins weaves, sews, hunts, fishes and makes basket fishing tackle & the implements of agriculture, and this variety of employment gives an acuteness of intellect to the negro which the mechanic whom the division of Labour condemns to one simple operation is precluded from attaining.”(Coleridge’s *Poetry and Prose*, 2004, p. 292)<sup>5</sup>

The observation on the innocence of the Africans implies a comparison with the corruption and vice of the Europeans, just like the two poems on pantisocracy where he contrasts the European vice, corruption and oppression to the imagined innocence, purity and freedom of the Susquehanna community. Another notable aspect in the passage is Coleridge’s illustration of the industrious nature of the Africans and the recognition of the ‘acuteness’ of their intellect. Abolitionist literature invoked feeling or the ability to feel as denominator for the sameness of the Africans and the Europeans. Coleridge, in this respect, was largely influenced by Benezet’s *Some Historical account of Guinea* where he praised the sophisticated skill of the Africans. Coleridge, according to Peter J. Kitson, here anticipates “his later Kantian distinction between a person and a thing: as every person is born with a faculty of reason, person can never become a Thing, nor be treated as such without wrong” (“Bales of Living Anguish” 2000, p. 524). The slave traders were precisely doing this; they treated persons as things. Kitson also refers to the telling example of Coleridge’s point of view from *Religious Musings* : where mid groans and shrieks Loud- laughing TRADE/ More hideous packs his bales of living anguish” (“Bales of Living Anguish” 2000, p. 524).

Apart from giving recognition to the industrious nature of the Africans and their intellectual ability the essay has a number of other notable issues. The lecture on the slave trade begins with the observation that all cause of evil is the ‘imaginary’/artificial wants. The West-Indian colony provided things like sugar rum, cocoa, log-wood, mahogany etc. But for Coleridge “with the exception of cotton and mahogany we cannot with truth call them useful, and not one is at present attainable by the poor and labouring part of the society.” (*Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, 2004, p. 289). The slave products are, therefore, luxuries feeding the artificial demands of the upper class people. According to Timothy Morton, Coleridge’s argument is an example of the discourse of ‘natural’ and the ‘unnatural’ where “the later implies the notions luxury, barbarity and social injustice” (“Blood Sugar” 1998, p. 88). Coleridge, thus, invoked the guilt of the consumers who for feeding their ‘unnatural’ wants led millions of Africans to their death. Morton observes that Coleridge’s purpose in the lecture was not to invoke the guilt of the audience most of whom were abstainers—Dissenters and Quakers (“Blood Sugar” 1988, p. 90). However, it must not be forgotten that Coleridge used similar arguments when he published the abridged form of the lecture in *The Watchman*. He was writing now for the greater audience and his purpose was to arouse the sense of guilt in the audience and only this would lead them to the thought of boycotting the products of slavery. To make his argument stronger he invokes the Christian metaphor of the Eucharist and reverses it. The food of grace is transmuted into cannibalism rather than transmuting the potentially cannibalistic food into the food of grace. Thus, eating sugar is visualized as eating human blood—the blood of the slaves. The nauseating metaphor was aimed at the conscience of the readers who sipped the blood sweetened beverage. The act of sipping tea or drinking rum becomes an act savagery, an act of blasphemy. He invokes Christianity and Jesus. Jesus would not now change water into wine but sugar back into blood, and luxury back into barbarism (*Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, 2004, p. 298). Christianity becomes his tool of criticism. In the 1796 version of the lecture Coleridge projected ‘one leprosy of evil’, the slave trade as an act of injury against God. All approvers of slavery, according to him, are atheist:

They who believe in God, believe him to be the loving parent of all men, —And is it possible that who really believe and fear the Father , should fearlessly authorise the oppression of his own Children? The Slavery and Tortures, and the most horrible murders of tens of thousands of his Children. (*Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, 2004, p. 295)

Coleridge, thus, opposed those who used Christianity –the biblical concept of the curse of Ham to justify slavery.

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<sup>5</sup> Coleridge’s “Lecture on the Slave Trade” was revised and published in *The Watchman* , and is reprinted in Norton critical Edition 287-299.

In a letter to George Coleridge in November 1794, Coleridge observes that speaking against slavery is equal to preaching the gospel:

I have been asked what is the best conceivable mode of meliorating society. My answer has been this: "Slavery is an abomination to my feeling of the head and the heart. Did Jesus teach the abolition of it? No! He taught those principles of which the necessary effect was to abolish all slavery. He prepared the mind for the reception before he poured the blessing." You ask me what the friend of universal equality should do. I answer: 'Talk not politics. Preach the Gospel!' ( *LSTC* Vol. 1, p.97)

Another remarkable point about Coleridge's observation in the essay is the thought of common humanity for all – human beings as a single species. Africans and Europeans are brothers. In his letter to Southey, quoted earlier, he calls Shad his brother. Coleridge in this regard was largely influenced by Clarkson's prize winning dissertation *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* where Clarkson argued in favour of a common humanity (132). Coleridge, therefore, opposes two basic arguments of the pro-slavery campaigners: that Africans are a different species and secondly, that Africans are suffering the curse of Ham. This is remarkable because gradually Coleridge's view of race would change and he would resort to the idea of this biblical myth and argue that the Africans are descendants of Ham.

In the essay Coleridge attacks Pitt for delaying the Slave Trade Bill. One of the arguments of the pro-slavery advocates had been that it was not time yet to abolish the trade. Coleridge attacks these people as atheists and criticises Pitt as insincere in pushing the Bill through. Pitt, Coleridge argues, had been instrumental in passing several bills, often draconian in nature, so it is impossible to believe that he could not do the same for this bill (Norton Critical Edition 295). Such criticism in 1796 was exceptional given the mellowing radical atmosphere and the fear of persecution. Coleridge's outspoken critique of the slave trade and slavery and the British involvement is also found in a number of poems written during this period. In "Ode on the Departing Year" ( *CPW* 118-122) Coleridge scathingly criticises England for its involvement with the slave trade and foretells the fall of Britain due to its atrocities committed all through Asia, Africa and Europe:

By Peace with proffer'd insult scared,  
Masked Hate and envying Scorn!  
By years of Havoc yet unborn!  
And Hunger's bosom to the frost-winds bared!  
But chief by Afric's wrongs,  
Strange, horrible, and foul!  
By what deep guilt belongs  
To the deaf Synod, 'full of gifts and lies!'  
By Wealth's insensate laugh! by Torture's howl!  
Avenger, rise! (L1.84-93)

Similar description of British atrocities is found in "Fears in Solitude". The poet's focus is chiefly the suffering of the Africans in the hands of the Britons but it is also inclusive of atrocities committed elsewhere:

From east to west  
A groan of accusation pierces Heaven!  
The wretched plead against us; multitudes  
Countless and vehement, the sons of God,  
Our brethren! Like a cloud that travels on,  
Steamed up from Cairo's swamps of pestilence,  
Even so, my countrymen! have we gone forth  
And borne to distant tribes slavery and pangs,  
And, deadlier far, our vices, whose deep taint  
With slow perdition murders the whole man,  
His body and his soul! (L1. 43-53).

The passage is also notable for its focus on the "deep taint", the vices that corrupt inwardly. Britons do not only torture the body but also corrupt the mind of the slaves.

In his “Lecture on the Slave Trade” Coleridge in similar vein remarked that whatever evil is committed by the Africans is taught by the corrupting Europeans and “Africans who are situated beyond the contagion of the European Vice are innocent and happy” (Coleridge’s *Poetry and Prose*, 292). Similarly in “Religious Musings” Coleridge undermines the colonial stereotypes as he blames the Britons as superstitious who in their lust for wealth and power murder and enslave the globe (Fulford, “Slavery and Superstition”, 2006, p. 46):

But o’er some plain that steameth to the sun,  
Peopled with death; or where more hideous Trade  
Loud-laughing packs his bales of human anguish;  
I will raise up a mourning, O ye Fiends!  
And curse your spells, that film the eye of Faith,  
Hiding the present God; whose presence lost,  
The moral world’s cohesion, we become  
An anarchy of Spirits! (P.104.Ll.139-46)

Commenting on the passage Peter J. Kitson observes that the “oxymoronic juxtaposition of the noun ‘bale’, with the adjectival compound ‘living’ functions as a powerful reminder of the European’s categorical mistake in forgetting that humanity is one species” (“Bales of Living Anguish” 2000, 524).

### **5. Coleridge’s Anti-slavery Discourse: Some Problems**

Though the anti-slavery lecture and subsequent essay based on this is very scathing in its attack on the slave trade and the stake holders in the trade there are a number of problems with Coleridge’s treatment of the subject. The most obvious problem relates to the origin of the anti-slavery lecture. It was a supplement to the project of Pantisocracy which was at base a colonial settlement. Southey and Coleridge exploited the anti-slavery sentiment to raise money for the project. Coleridge in the essay criticises ‘artificial wants’ but he delivered the lecture in a coffee house which is a place for marketing such ‘artificial wants’(Thomas H. *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, 2004, p. 101). Coleridge, therefore, participated in a commerce he condemned in his lectures and many of his early poems.

Another question that needs to be answered is: what is the basic purpose of the anti-slavery lectures or much of his writings on slave trade: saving the slaves or saving the British people from the guilt of the human commerce—a guilt that does not go with Christianity? In answering the third objection against abolition of the slave trade, (that the revenue would be injured) the argument turns on to the loss of the British seamen: “the West-India trade is more often a losing than a winning trade—a lottery with more blanks than prizes in it. It is likewise asserted to the grave of our Seamen” (NCE, 293). The focus is somewhat shifted from the slaves to the sailors. Helen Thomas points to the shift in Coleridge’s anti-slavery discourse as she objects to Coleridge equating the farmers and poors of London to the slaves. “Coleridge’s analysis of the trade” she argues, “implied that without the demand for luxurious goods, the problems of London’s poor would be eradicated. His lectures hence presented a shift in focus away from the plight of African victims. . . .”( *Romanticism and the Slave Narratives*, 2004, 92). Similarly in answering the fifth objection against abolition (that it is not yet time for abolition of the trade) Coleridge comments that if the British can abolish the trade before the French do it would be an advantage to preach “the rights of man to the negroes”. Britain, Coleridge argues, should take this advantage over France (*Coleridge’s poetry and Prose*, 2004, 294). Coleridge was concerned with the evil impact that slave-trade might have on his homeland. The impending doom of England drives the poet to send a timely warning and the fall of Britain seems to be more dearly lamented: “Not yet enslaved, not wholly vile, /O Albion! O my mother Isle”. Coleridge mourns that the beautiful island will be destroyed. With grassy heals, pastoral valleys, surrounding ocean he builds a picture of England. Nature has protected England for long. But now it awaits destruction: “The nations curse thee! They with eager wondering/ Shall hear Destruction, like a vulture, scream!”(Ode on the Departing Year 139-140). Coleridge’s stance, therefore, was basically nationalist—very much Anglo centric, though inflammatory.

### **6. Coleridge’s Shift Into the Inner Space and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**

In his lecture and poems Coleridge uses a metaphorical language. There is no direct description of the atrocities. Coleridge writes that such description has reached a saturation point. The question that comes to the mind is whether Coleridge was deliberately avoiding the images of torture and murder. He avoids the real in favour of the metaphorical.

During 1797-98 Coleridge talked of withdrawal from the immediate worldly events and detachment in letters to J.P. Estline (1797) and to his brother (1798) (as cited in Helen Thomas, 2004, 97). Helen Thomas discovers in Coleridge's writing a tendency to move into the inner space and she finds Coleridge more and more moving towards the form of spiritual autobiography. She claims that the genre of Romantic poetry was shaped by combining the spiritual autobiography with the anti-slavery ideology: "Coleridge's poetical schema prescribes both a revival and revision of spiritual autobiography, established by radical dissenting Protestantism, and reveals the subtle relationship between the emergence of anti-slavery ideology and the development of the Romantic genre" (p.103).

Coleridge's shift into the inner space results in poems like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has been read in relation to Southey's poem "The Sailor who Served in the Slave Trade" since J. L. Lowes (1927) linked the two poems. William Empson(1964), Ebbatson(1972), Peter J. Kitson (2000), Debbie Lee(1998), Patrick Keane(1994) and Carol Blton(2007) all have followed suit. They have interpreted both the poems as exploring the guilt and anxiety caused by maritime exploration, the slave trade and colonial expansion. Southey's treatment of the theme is, however, direct and overt compared to the covert and indirect approach to the issue. Southey's mariner knows his guilt and the readers know as well but it is difficult to identify the precise nature of the Mariner's guilt in Coleridge's poem. "In Coleridge's poem . . . specific identification of the slave trade as a 'sin' is absent" (Helen Thomas, 2004, p. 93). Tim Fulford (2002) comments that Coleridge's poem might have "prompted Southey to offer an empirical (highly political) cause for a mariner's mental and physical anguish (p. 50).

This indirectness might have had many causes and has been interpreted both as a positive gesture and a negative one. Coleridge had been talking of withdrawal from worldly politics and this might have been the cause of his indirectness and this withdrawal could be due to the fear of being persecuted by the state machinery. It might have also been due to Coleridge's appropriation of the form of spiritual autobiography as made out by Helen Thomas. Coleridge's indirectness may also be interpreted as the part of the shift in focus from the imperial periphery to the homeland, as exemplified by the slave trade lecture. Bolton commenting on Southey refers to Clarkson's observation on the condition of the sailors in the slave ships. Clarkson, Bolton argues, wanted to bring slavery home to make the anti-slavery campaign successful—to arouse the sympathy. Southey did just that. Coleridge might be doing the same. Michael Tausing (1993) argues that the mariner serves the "crucial cultural job of bringing alterity home" (p.41). But the problem with Coleridge's poem is its mystical nature (49). Unlike Southey's poem it never mentions slavery. However, the use of maritime images and reference to forms of disease (yellow fever) lead us to identify a link between the mariner's guilt and slave trade. Debbie Lee(1998) argues that in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* Coleridge merges the "fear of miscegenation with the fear of fever" (p. 681). Similar argument is forwarded by Tim Fulford(2002). Coleridge conflates the physical and moral disease of colonialism in the poem. The slave trade, Fulford (2002) argues, exposed thousands of Black Africans and British sailors to yellow fever, smallpox, yaw, plague, and other fatal infections. Coleridge had sympathy both for these sailors and the slaves. "In 'The Rime', he returns to the images of infection he had used in that lecture: the mariner, like a sailor on a slave-ship bound for the West Indies, enters a zone where all becomes tainted with the diseases of empire" (pp. 49-50). The poem, therefore, came to be seen as a veiled critique of commerce, slavery, greed for wealth, and empire. Patrick Keane (1994), however, offers a different view on the poem. Keane offers a very careful political reading of the poem. He compares the Mariner's false hopes with Coleridge's soon to be disappointed belief that Pitt's ministry could be toppled by early 1798. He interprets the Mariner's blessing of the water- snakes as an example of capitulation rather than benediction, though he concedes that *The Ancient Mariner* is far "too rich and protean and "psychologically complex" to be reduced to "'mere politics' ", especially the negative politics of "accommodation and capitulation" (p.175). Keane observes: "symbolically the blessings of the water snakes may be less a moment of internalized redemption than individual and collective capitulation" (p.190). Deliverance comes once the mariner surrenders.

### **7. Coleridge's Evolution from Radicalism to Conservatism**

If we consider the development of Coleridge's attitude to race and slavery we can see his growing conservatism. Keane (1994) puts it as Coleridge's "oscillating evolution from radicalism to conservatism" (p. 53). There are two aspects to this development: 1. He was gradually subscribing to the racist theories of the time and 2. Christianity became his tool for justifying racism and slavery and Christianization of the slaves became a thing of greater importance to Coleridge than the liberty of the slaves.



As early as 1808 Coleridge's attitude to Africa undergoes changes. Coleridge imagines Africa as a producer of cheap goods—they would produce “articles necessary for our consumption”. Coleridge argued in favour of Christianization by “a systematic repression of all religion proselytism” (as cited in Kitson, 2000, p. 528)). “He came to see Africa as a market for commercial development, and Africans as suitable subjects for conversion to Christianity” (as cited in Kitson, 2000, p. 528). Coleridge was gradually changing his position towards the state and the Church and was afraid that abolition of slavery would lead to social disorder (Paul-Emile, 1974).

J H Haeger (1974) pioneered the study of Coleridge's attitude to race towards the end of his career by analysing Coleridge's remarks in his notebooks which Haeger entitles "On the Definition of Species," "Degeneration and Race," and "The Historic Race" (p. 333). Haeger shows that the change in Coleridge's attitude to the slaves and the issue of slavery in the first decade of the nineteenth century grew into maturity in the second and third decade and by 1830 Coleridge's early writing on slavery became an anomaly.

Anybody reading these three notebook entries together with his *Table Talk* and some letters written to his friends and correspondents might be surprised by Coleridge's formulations. Coleridge still argued that human beings are one species but he argued in “The Historic Race” that “the human Species consists of *One historic Race and of several others*”(emphasis Coleridge's, as cited in Haeger, 1974, p. 344). Inspired by the race theories of the time Coleridge argued that the central race is the Caucasian/ European white: “I have given Cacasian the first place because...they must be considered the original race” (Notebooks Vol. 5, 2002, p. 23). The African, "the Negro" is associated with the biblical Ham, and equated to the "unhistoric and the Degenerous". In *Degeneration of Race* Coleridge describes the ‘Negro’ as “historically and mythically” descended from Ham (as cited in Keane, 1994, p. 62). Elsewhere Coleridge refers to “the almost universal opinion of the learned that Africa was peopled by the posterity of Ham” (as cited in Keane, 1994, p. 62)). The same scriptural argument was used by the slavers to justify slavery. Coleridge argued that the ‘historic race’ is ‘central Race’ and this ‘central Race’ would save man from ‘Degeneracy’. Coleridge's argument of the master race leading the other races that ‘the central Race, would save man from Degeneracy is the Judeo-Christian religious dispensation (Haeger, 1974, p. 348). Christ, the son of God, Coleridge argues, would regenerate mankind:

—and briefly and generally applies this principle to the consideration of the Races relatively to the Goodness of God and the Redemption of Men as before in relation to the Depravity of Man and the retributive Justice of God? i.e. to the introduction of a conservative and vegetative Process by and in the different Races? the Son of God [~~working as~~] in both his divine Offices, in one direction as the Verbum revelatum, and in another as the Numen vel atum (Dominus veniens in nubibes) preparing for and gradually establishing an opposition of quality in the different Families of the Earth?namely, a central Race, which comparatively and practically became? Stirps Generosa Historica, or the Semito-Iapetic with two appendages, the Semito-Hammonic and the Iapetic-Hammonic (sc. the Celtic and Sclavonic) and the Hammonic and Mixed Progenies, forming the four degenerations or divergent Races correspondent to the four states, the Barbarous, Rude, Wild, & the union of the first and third, the African or Negro, the [~~American~~] Mongolian or Asiatic, the Malay, as far as this Classification of the Races is borne out by the Fact?” (As cited in Haeger, 1974 p. 350)

Coleridge, therefore, in his theories of race is both Christo-centric and Eurocentric. Therefore, it is discernible why he advocated Christianity to solve the problem of slavery rather than allowing them to be free. In his discussion with Thomas Pringles (June, 1833), a member of the Abolition Society in England Coleridge expressed critical opinion on those who spoke for the freedom of the slaves:

I utterly condemn your frantic practice of declaiming about their [colonisers'] Rights to the Blacks. They ought to be forcibly reminded of the state in which their brethren in Africa still are, and taught to be thankful for the Providence that has placed them within means of grace.” (1990, *Table Talk* p. 386)

Once again the emphasis is on civilizing through Christianization. It is strange enough that Coleridge sees the slaves as better off than their African free brothers.

Coleridge's racial theory and his attitude to slavery, therefore, have also imperial implications. Haeger's observation would be relevant here. Haeger (1974) observes that

His[Coleridge's] coordinated exposition there of the premise of a master race leading to the doctrine of the white man's burden and the idea of ethical-moral progress, enunciates the cultural assumptions of British imperialism later in the century and fore shadows the ideas of Carlyle and Nietzsche, with the degenerate outcome of such thinking during this century."(p. 355)

Coleridge's initial involvement with anti-slavery discourse, and his radical criticism of the pro-slavery lobby began to fade away at the start of the new century. Gradually, Coleridge subscribed to the race theories of the time and began looking at the black and white as two different races of men though of the same human species. During this period he also became an advocate of Christianity and propagated the view that Christianization is the sole way of redemption.

"And Slavery's spectres shriek and vanish from the ray" (CP, p. 75) –this is what Coleridge wrote in 1794 in his sonnet 'La Fayette'. He wanted slavery to vanish from sight and the poems and articles he wrote in the early 1790 reflect this attitude to slavery and the slave trade. However, the 'spectres' of slavery did not vanish and later came to haunt the poet and in his later writings, surprisingly, he was reluctant to bid goodbye to the 'spectres of slavery'.

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