



Book Report:

Breaking the Chains of Psychologica Slavery

by Na'im Akbar

Student's Name

Institutional Affiliation



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I would like to begin my report by saying that I agree with the overall attitude of Akbar towards the need to consider the experience of slavery. I also agree with his thought about the unproductiveness of shedding tears over the past, as well as looking there for all the right answers. However, I do not entirely agree on the conclusions drawn by the author to utilize his considerations related to the issues of the black people. Namely, he suggested a kind of psychohistory of African-Americans that allegedly started with slavery. My argument is based on the fact that Akbar did not limit his attention to the narrow physiological aspects. His book contains many generalizations that are not necessarily relevant to psychology. Most importantly, it makes various controversial assumptions about the means of overcoming the problems that were identified by the author as roughly accurate and associated with many independent contributing factors.

In the first chapter titled “The Psychological Legacy of Slavery”, Akbar describes various existing patterns of slavery of African-Americans. It is important to remember that in author’s opinion, they are essentially interrelated. I incline to agree with his overall interpretation of the said patterns in relation to work. Indeed, the way the successful black people are portrayed in dominating modern American media, including films industry, emphasizes a rich life without the need to do any identifiable work. The black people as a community are not seen, and they fail to perceive themselves as the potential initiators of any productive hard-working enterprise with long-term goals. They work for someone instead, getting enough money to make a living, and affected by the illusion of leisure associated with the temporary employment. They are also likely to invest much energy developing sophisticated schemes in order to avoid work that is seen as punishment and inferiority business. However, I cannot agree with the author’s statement about the work being

perceived with pride in the 'natural' society. It is not clear what natural society is. Rich people, who comprise just a few percent, own a bigger half of the national wealth in this country. Therefore, it is not very reasonable to equate the African-Americans with the poor. Nonetheless, the unfortunate economic examples, such as the Detroit's bankruptcy, speak in favor of the author. Moreover, it should be noted that the book was written in 1996. At the time, the state of society might have seemed more traditional or natural than it is now. Also, the author mentions the overall contributing factors to the attitude of black people towards work. They include a shortage of jobs, discrimination, the nature of community-building, and the growth of society's propensity to leisure. The negative perception of work is complemented by the fact that the African-Americans adhere to their communities and have not been fully assimilated. This culture tends to preserve slavery patterns.

I also agree with the author's evaluation of the phenomenon of personal inferiority of African-Americans. In my opinion, it is a more noteworthy psychological factor than the aforementioned. According to Akbar, everything was done to suppress the sense of self-respect of the black people. The slavery was a systematic process of creating inferiority. Slaves were kept filthy and physically constrained. They were helpless to change their condition for better. Today, the inferiority is expressed in the inability to respect African-American leadership and expertise, the lack of reference to African self-affirmation, a high degree of Black-to-Black crime, and the occupation of laboring jobs. Slave owners often had to be approached as gods. The recent events in Ferguson and the fact that assassination of the black people is not perceived as the crime that is as important as the murder of the white people may also be used to support this argument.

In the second chapter "Liberation from Mental Slavery", Akbar ceases to mostly outline the existing patterns and engages in the active discussion related to the perspectives of the African-Americans in overcoming the



self-destroying consciousness. I disagree with the author's statements about the strategies to break the chains of slavery. First of all, he has previously spoken of slavery as of the phenomenon of the past. In this chapter, he starts to develop means to overcome a set of relations that are more than could be attributed to mere physiological dependence. Furthermore, the author makes claims about the exclusive role of the African-Americans in overcoming the historical slavery. They are portrayed as far more radical than any abolitionists. Akbar has a disturbing manner to refer to certain individuals, such as Frederick Douglas, when he needs to support some idea. A few sections further, he forgets about the role of these individuals altogether and primarily refers to the communities or collectives of both the black and white people. Nonetheless, the following point of the author sounds entirely reasonable. Because the racism is a fact, it does not mean that it can serve as a foundation for seeking solutions to psychological slavery. The path to freedom lies not in altering white people's minds. The solution must be therefore found independently and by the black people themselves.

Akbar suggests that developing the social-psychological environment, in which the African-Americans would be told the stories about their accomplishments, was this solution. The history must not be ignored and must not be the teaching of excessive and distorted information about the white people. The historic facts state that it was the advantage of human oppression that created privileges of the few, and not God or generic deficiency. Thus, raising the knowledge of self is the way to overcome this historical dependence. At this point, I would agree with the author. However, this approach is the contrary to the one outlined in the first chapter. It suggests that an identity can be either a collective project, or a failure, or a negative project against the demonstrated third party (the white people). In my opinion, it is this demonstrating that prevents the possibility to overcome the past negative experience and to start the work on self-reflection. The author continually points to the trend among the black people to act like the white ones. But he also fails to avoid this imitation in suggesting the same means of



teaching history with the exclusion of the European side of the story. I believe that a viable project of identity cannot be based on the opposition or imitation of another identity. It should create, constitute, and develop its own ideas that may influence others independently.

Finally, in the third chapter entitled “Racial Religious Inquiry and Psychological Confusion”, Akbar engages in the discussion of ideas that, despite the name, are directly related to physiological practice. In particular, he suggests an interesting concept of religious imagery. The image of God determines the limits of an individual’s mind and physiological perception. The God’s image should not be finite. One should expand the experience with bigger images to avoid narrow perception. I fully agree with these statements. Not as much in terms of religion, but such a metaphysical imagery largely affects the perception of one’s place in the world. Therefore, the prison in one’s mind is the most dangerous one. Moreover, if a person does not look for the bigger achievements in his/her life, it is likely that the God will not help this person and will not want them to have more than they already have.

The author discusses the impact of the specific image of God on the psychology of the portrayed race. The fact that someone is portrayed influences those not portrayed. Akbar outlines the people’s exposure to the risk of confusing the image with their race. Such confusion impedes the development and undermines people’s capacity to correct themselves. It implies that they are already perfect and clearly know who they are. The author claims that these were the distinct features of the European world that is engaged in self-destruction and is hated by many nations around the world. However, I agree with the disapproval of Eurocentrism as an undutiful practice, and I think that the author has failed to study the depth of European culture as separated from Eurocentric biased perception. It was Europe that gave birth to the phenomenon of African-American slavery. Nevertheless, it was also Europe that condemned it, as well as denounced colonialism, and gave birth to the concept of human rights.

Therefore, Akbar's book is not merely about the slavery and its contemporary patterns, but mostly about escaping from this experience. The author changes his attitude towards the role of slavery in shaping the mind of modern African-Americans throughout the chapters and sections of his book. At first, it is seen as contributing factor to the problems that African-Americans are facing today. However, later, it becomes a 'plantation ghost' that the black people need to distant themselves from as soon and as much as possible. My analysis of the selected problems has cautiously considered this angle.

