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Book Review Essay: *A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery, and Resistance*¹

Reviewed by Alexandra Smithie²

The Western world is still coming to terms with colonialism. Sayings that refer to the history of Britain as an “empire on which the sun never sets” hint at the subtle glorification of colonialism that still haunts the Western conscience. According to a YouGov poll conducted in 2016, almost 44% of British people are proud of their nation’s empire (Dahlgreen, 2016). Stella Dadzie’s book *A Kick in the Belly* is a sharp rebuke to those who view their country’s colonial past as glorious. Published when many Western nations are finally beginning to decolonize their curricula, *A Kick in the Belly* offers valuable insight into the crucial role of enslaved women in subverting white patriarchal dominance.

A Kick in the Belly is broken into seven sections, documenting women’s journeys throughout the process of enslavement and outlining the myriad ways in which they resisted every step of the way. Dadzie begins with a haunting description of the holding cells that imprisoned captured Africans: “The governor’s breezy rooms contrast starkly with the suffocating gloom of the slave holes below, where the claw marks of the desperate and the dying are still visible above a dark, indelible tidemark of human waste” (Dadzie, 2020, p. 17). However, in the same chapter, Dadzie also lists several powerful African women leaders who refused to be complicit in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, even though it was extremely lucrative for African chieftains who chose to participate in it. In the second section, Dadzie outlines the Middle Passage, a journey which could often take four months, and during which enslaved Africans suffered from disease, death, and malnutrition. Despite the unhygienic and barbaric conditions that dominated the slave ships, many enslaved people still revolted, with some even staging mutinies and turning the ships back around (Dadzie, 2020, p. 42). In the third chapter, Dadzie boldly challenges the stereotype that women “had an easier time under slavery because they spent so much of it on their backs” (Dadzie, 2020, p. 8). Many enslaved women, in fact, bore the brunt of physical hardship through field labor just as frequently, if not more often, than men. Enslaved women were highly valued for their “stamina and physical endurance” (Dadzie, 2020, p. 72), with women often being preferred over men for fieldwork. Some enslaved women voluntarily engaged in sexual relations with their masters to gain “preferential treatment” for themselves and their families; it was a strategic move (Dadzie, 2020, p. 130). In the fourth chapter, Dadzie discusses punishment. The frequency and ferocity with which masters would sadistically beat their slaves to the point of exhaustion shows how terrified white people were of those they enslaved. Masters, overseers, and their families lived in constant fear of revolt because they could not fully subjugate their slave populations. They used chains, whips, and other torture and mutilation devices because they knew that without severe and arbitrary bodily punishment, they could not keep their tenuous hold over the enslaved people. The fifth chapter describes the multitudes of ways in which women would subvert authority. These cunning methods ranged from pretending to be stupid in order to enrage their enslavers to

¹ Dadzie, S. (2020). *A kick in the belly: Women, slavery, and resistance*. Verso.

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poisoning their masters' food and drink (Dadzie, 2020, p. 115). One of the book's most interesting sections is the sixth chapter, which explores bodily autonomy and enslaved women's choice not to reproduce. Though Black women were encouraged to have children, they took measures to do the opposite. Women took abortive plants, refused to have sexual intercourse, and even resorted to infanticide as a "mercy killing" to spare their children from a lifetime of merciless labor (Dadzie, 2020, p. 150). The seventh chapter outlines the importance of the oral tradition to the yearning for freedom and the indomitable spirit of slaves. Because African cultures often have an oral tradition, women kept the customs of birthing, music, and storytelling alive even when they were forcibly ripped from their villages. Their African cultural inheritance fostered resistance even when slave masters banned speaking African languages, gathering in groups, and other repressive measures (Dadzie, 2020, p. 156).

Dadzie outlines the many ways in which women subverted the power of their masters. The most interesting discussion was the aspect of controlled reproduction, in which women refused to give birth in the West Indies due to the brutal conditions of slavery. Despite efforts by planters to increase the birth rate through monetary incentives, better diet, and other measures, the birth rate stagnated throughout slavery, rebounding at extraordinary rates once slavery was finally abolished.

Through her powerful discussion of race and gender, Dadzie brings up a thought-provoking comment on the differences in gender roles between races. While people thought white women were too fragile to perform basic tasks, especially when pregnant, Black women were forced to work throughout their pregnancy and endured extreme physical punishments if they fell behind. The concept of gender was radically different when applied to separate races; in both cases, gender was used to make women inferior (though enslaved women suffered much more than their white counterparts). It is fascinating how slave owning societies turned gender norms on their heads to brutalize enslaved women and extract as much labor as possible from their bodies. Through these depictions, Dadzie highlights that the definition of gender roles under a patriarchal system can morph to fit whatever is most convenient for the wealthy white man so that he can maintain control.

Dadzie's characterization of gender roles based on racial hierarchy fits well within the scholarly canon. In Gatewood's 2002 review of Nell Irvin Painter's *Southern History across the Color Line*, he writes that "both [white and slave women] were considered the property of the slaveowner/husband to whom women of both categories owed obedience and submission" (Gatewood, 2002, p. 681). While white women had to maintain total sexual purity to conform with the European obsession with virginity, their husbands were allowed to have sexual relations with enslaved women, whom white men viewed as little more than sexual objects and bodies to labor in the fields. This undeniably created heightened tensions between white women and enslaved women. The resentment that white women felt manifested itself in cruel treatment for the enslaved women, over whom they had direct control. Dadzie's book suggests that concepts such as whiteness and femininity can change over time and are often directly manipulated by those interested in maintaining power. For example, white planters created the ideology that race was more important than class. By convincing poor whites that they had a meaningful difference in status from slaves, they could undermine class solidarity and create a white identity in order to subjugate non-white groups (Harris, 1993, p. 1716). Simultaneously, white planters persuaded poor whites that they had a stake in the system that harmed them as well, even if to a lesser degree, by making it impossible for yeoman farmers to earn competitive wages. Dadzie's comments are

similar to the established canon: women needed to conform to different expectations based on race, thus creating a division between the two groups of women despite the fact that they both suffered under patriarchy.

Academic texts are often daunting due to their formal style and impenetrable language. Dadzie's text, however, is made accessible through its conversational tone and use of commonplace vocabulary. Though universities, museums, and other educational and cultural institutions have pledged to decolonize their curricula and exhibitions, not much has changed in terms of accessibility. Texts are still dense and difficult. Dadzie has accomplished something admirable: a short, compelling read packed with key insights that is simultaneously easy to absorb. The prose is clear, concise, and powerful.

Despite her discussion of Afro-centric historians in the book's introduction, Dadzie left out some of their perspectives in the book. In the introduction, Dadzie writes, "In over 400 years of slavery, with all its documented horrors, what happened to the women? I soon discovered that a growing number of Afrocentric historians, many of them based in the Caribbean, had been asking the selfsame question... [these historians] had been doing invaluable research in this area" (Dadzie, 2020, p. 6). While Dadzie uses the words of Lucille Mair throughout the text, the book could be further strengthened by including more quotes embedded in the paragraphs themselves. For example, towards the end of the book, Dadzie writes a paragraph on the Jamaican historian Edward Kamau Braithwaite, who "argued that this diverse and constantly adapting African culture was able to resist its own destruction because it was 'carried within the individual (or) community, not (as in Europe) ...'" (Dadzie, 2020, p. 169). This was an excellent way to include the voice of Caribbean contemporary historians, and more quotations like this would have strengthened the book's overall message.

Dadzie's book is a powerful retelling of history that refuses to portray enslaved women as powerless and subservient, instead describing how they fostered a culture of fierce resistance in the face of horrific bodily and mental abuse. Women were not passive victims, but rather they were of utmost importance in the unending struggle for their freedom. Though enslaved people were abused and dehumanized, it was the planters who were entirely dependent on the labor of Black bodies for everything—their lifestyle, their fortunes, and their power. Through the discussion of women's culture of resistance, Dadzie works against patriarchal power structures in schools and elsewhere that silence and ignore women's resistance.

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