Human Rights Exploitation: Unending Circle of “Beloved” in Toni Morrison’s Beloved

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Abstract— Beloved holistically put emphasis on the fragmented but interconnected issues of race and gender along with the contextual tone of slavery which becomes the frame in which human rights exploitation functions. This paper acknowledges these interrelated exploitative themes of gender, race and slavery in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and their power to devour the human rights. Furthermore it also tries to see contemporary relevance of these issues of exploitation in 21st century.

Keywords— Capitalism, Donald Trump, Human rights, Identity, Orientalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Morrison sees her writing as a tool for liberation from various exploitations of human rights in face of slavery, racism and suppression on grounds of gender. In Free Speech Leadership program she states that “a writer’s life and work are not the gift to mankind, they are its necessity.” By saying this she sees her own marginalization from the main stream literature which is dominated by white idealism, white man’s burden and all other occidental concepts. Burns in “The Unspoken Spoken” analyzed the role of Toni Morrison in reflecting the normative injustice which African Americans face. Following Toni Morrison’s argument that African American history of slavery is always shrouded in “comfortable state of national amnesia”, she reflected that American literary canon has always neglected injustice against African-Americans which becomes a “necessity” for her to bring that in limelight. So Toni Morrison through Beloved wants to reflect the right exploitation, injustice and confined freedom of African Americans by distorting the preconceived image of black as oriented by whites.

II. CONTEXT OF EXPLOITATION IN BELOVED

An article “Arrest of Fugitive Slave” with the subheading “A Slave Mother Murders her Child rather than see it Returned to Slavery” in Cincinnati Gazette on January 29, 1856 became context of Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Novel is set in 1873 at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio where Sethe (slave mother Margaret Garner in news) and Denver are living along with the haunting appearance of ghost of Beloved (two year old daughter whom Sethe has killed to save her from slavery). Denver is frustrated because she is lonely as they are marginalized from their own community because everyone considers that “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom”(Morrison 3). Appearance of Paul D takes novel in 1850 when he along with Sethe, Halle, Baby Suggs and other slaves was a captive slave at Sweet Home Plantation. Journey from their exploitation in plantation to their escape and afterlife of escape is captured in the novel. Even after getting freedom from slavery Sethe and Paul D felt that they are still surrounded by clouds of memory which “dissolved[s] in sifting daylight”(Morrison 311). Moreover Sethe’s claim that “Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison 111-112) is self-explanatory which asserts that memory rejuvenates the haunting past. Novel ends with exorcism of Beloved and Denver emerges as a working member of whole community.

What compelled a mother to kill her own daughter? Sethe born in slavery, lived in slavery, had firsthand experience with slavery and its exploitative nature: be it physical lynching as depicted by “chokecherry tree”(Morrison 18) that is metaphor for “revolting clump of scars”(Morrison 25) on Sethe’s back, be it sexual as Sethe was molested sexually by schoolteacher’s nephews as represented by words “took my milk”(Morrison 19), or be it psychological like reminiscence of past experience that haunts slave’s present and threatens the future, how can she as a mother make her child fall in the same furnace in which she has been burnt. To confirm this an anti-slavery activist Lucy Stone claimed in the court on the trial day that if Margaret (i.e. Sethe) wanted her child to be free from “coming woe” then who says that “she has no right to do so?” Sethe and other slaves were marginalized from the Eurocentric sphere and thus were devoid of each and every human right as they were treated as animals not humans.

In context of this debate concerning freedom of slaves Helen Moglen says that “material project of slavery…is commodification of black body and body’s
sexualisation”. Schoolteacher’s claim in the novel that he has all “rights” on his slaves shows black slaves as his “property” that goes in tune with the Fugitive Slave Law that was practiced in 1790s in Cincinnati. Well commodification is itself a dehumanizing aspect of humanity which is visible in the hearsay of Paul D who heard that Paul G was sold by Mrs. Garner (owner of Sweet Home Plantation) in the “dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis and his future” (Morrison 267). A critic Rafael Peroz-Terres says “commodity and exchange serve as the only form of interaction between blacks and whites in Beloved”. This exchange on its most basic level involves the marketing of human beings.” Commercial terms like marketing, trading and property define objectification aspects of slavery which treats slaves as objects.

III. IDENTITY

Lacan’s concept of “mirror stage” is apt to describe the existential crisis that slaves faced according to this concept slaves are considered to be mere reflections of other’s gaze unaware of their own identity. As in Beloved the slaves like Paul D, Paul F and Paul A are unknown to the fact that why are they named such but a prevalent assumption is that they are named such because probably their master’s name would have been Paul, Baby Suggs becomes habitual of beings addressed as same despite her true name being Jenny as noticed by Mr. Garner on her “sales ticket” (Morrison 167) who tells her that “Baby Suggs ain’t no name for a freed Negro” (Morrison 167), not even this even the name of the slave Sixo shows that he is sixth slave, so it shows that these slaves are devoid of the basic human requirement of their own identity. Now originates a question that if a person is unknown of one’s own identity, one’s own existences then can one assert one’s own right in the highly unjust power structure? Slaves are devoid of legislative laws and receive barbaric treatment. Schoolteacher in Beloved is representative of the unjust power structure who beats one of his slaves in order to justify that “definitions belong to the definers, not to the defined” (Morrison 68). Those who define are the beholders of power structure who have financial superiority and hegemony.

IV. PAUL D: HUMAN TRAFFICKING, STATE OF PRISON

Dehumanized representation of black slaves is analyzed in case of Paul D who is another victim of slavery. Like an animal he is traded reflecting Atlantic Slave Trade and chained and collared. His experience at prison is hardcore disturbing. First of all it’s important to acknowledge the reason he was sent behind “door of bars” (Morrison 125), it’s again the same underlying reason for which most of African-Americans of that era were sent to jail i.e. their exploitation on pretext of slavery. Frustrated because of lynching and abuses he decided to kill his master Brandywine and in retaliation was sent to prison. Slaves like Paul D were forced to wear “iron bits” (Morrison 83) in their mouths in order to restrain them from speaking hence snatchng their freedom of speech and degrading their human stature to an animal. Paul D laments that the farm rooster Mister was in better condition than him as rooster being a bird was roaming and crowing freely whereas he a human was confined to remain shut. How ironical it is that prison, a place where those who commit some criminal offence and exploit any form of human right or civil rights are punished, the place where injustice is punished at the same place prisoners are exploited of their human dignity and rights. They were sexually molested by the prisoner guard, “chained” like animals, had to work like cattle and kept in “coffin like boxes”. With this comes Judith Butler’s Gender Theory which states that “gender is performance…rather than who you are”. Slaves are viewed as always under suppression which is feminine attribute and those in power like white folks and prison guard are exploitative and have upper hand like males. Talking about hegemony of the prison guards he says that “obedience came with hammer at dawn” i.e. lynching was mundane act which comes with dawn. Not even Paul D, even Sethe is defined as “animal like”.

V. ORIENTALISM

Surfacing the theme of Orientalism, Beloved brings up the idea of Eurocentric gaze which is biased against Orientals as described in the novel when Stamp Paid, a former slave in novel says “white people believed” that “every dark skin was a jungle”, but then he continues that “it was jungle white folk planted in them…”, (Morrison 234) thus shows that behavior and act of black slaves depends on the acts of white masters. Had not Sethe been marginalized, had not she been sexually exploited and lynched in the Sweet Home Plantation, had she not been suppressed under demon of slavery; she would not have tried to escape, she would not have to face the horrors of Fugitive Slave Act, she would not have killed her own daughter and would not have been compelled to snatch her own daughter’s right to live which is the basic right of every human being. The exploited had to become exploiter to save someone from exploitation.

VI. INFANTICIDE

The broad narrative of the novel is from the feminine perspective. Infanticide, an act that is against the human rights according to legislature plays a vital role in defining exploitation. Slavery, racism and capitalism are
seen as a stimulator of this exploitative act. Sethe’s act of
butchering her infant baby was an act to free the infant
from the shackles of slavery as slave children born into
slavery become property of their parent’s masters and
Sethe does not want her daughter to face the evils of
slavery, sexual exploitation which she herself has faced.
Another instance of Ella, a black slave who was
captivated and sexually abused by the duo of a white
father and son killed the child born to them.

Women like Sethe and Linda has to face these stages
of sexual molestation and infanticides which actually
marks the Slave Age. These infanticides are benchmark of
their infant’s freedom from future threats. These novels
highlight the conflict between motherhood and slavery as
slavery acts as an obstacle in the role of a mother because
it does not leave space for female slaves to perform the
duties as a mother.

VII. FREEDOM
Freedom though a common word has different meaning
for different people in different eras. For people living in
twenty first century freedom is to talk freely, walk freely,
and do anything they desire to without harming anyone’s
dignity and stature but freedom to the slaves of Cincinnati
in post-Civil War era (1851-1856) was to free themselves
from chains of enslavement and exploitation. Their
struggle for freedom was to claim their basic human
rights which were exploited. Freedom in post-civil war
America counts sacrifice; it is not a birth right of all
citizens rather slaves had to make abundant sacrifices to
claim that in the eyes of American forefathers. Sethe flew
from plantation to own freedom while she was expecting,
after one month of freedom when Fugitive Slave Law fall
upon her in manifestation of the schoolteacher she instead
of putting her daughter in hell of slavery killed her. The
depiction of “Clearing”, a place where Baby Suggs
preaches like a preacher actually provides an outlet for
emotions of these slaves which are suppressed by their
masters. She says “Let the children come...Let your
mothers hear you laugh...Let the grown men come...Let
your wives and children see you dance...Finally she
called women to her. ‘Cry’ she told them. For living and
death Just Cry.”(Morrison 103)The minor beads of
slavery, race and gender are ornamented together with a
single thread of capitalism.

VIII. CAPITALISM
Capitalism is seen as the primary reason for exploitation
of not only black but even whites. Had there been no
need of capital this master-slave duo would never have
existed. Novel as a whole encompasses relations between
master and slave irrespective of their color, creed and sex;
it victimizes its prey irrespective of their ethnicity. Not
even black women like Baby Suggs were objects of
sexual exploitation whose “eight children had six fathers”
(Morrison 28) but even Amy Denver told Sethe about her
“whippings” (Morrison 93) and sexual molestation when
she was servant slave of her master Mr. Buddy. Sexual
exploitation is seen as violation of human dignity of the
exploited person. Toni Morrison said “the function of
freedom is to free someone else”, this is actually visible in
Beloved as Amy Denver who was herself was a fugitive
helps Sethe to gain freedom by escaping.

Even the same capitalism was the reason of increasing
prison records of African-Americans in America during
the Great Recession of 2007-09. Christian E. Weller and
Jaryn Fields in “The Black and White Labor -Gap in
America” at Center of American Progress in July 2011
analyzed this issue that money is the reason for increasing
prison records of African Americans which actually
hinders the ways of Black Americans in getting
employment which undertones the critical issue of racial
discrimination as jobs which were already limited due to
recession were offered to whites. In an interview with
Francois Nouldemanna, Toni Morrison said that “slavery
is married to racism against black and that racism run in
the blood of common”, this clarifies that racism has its
roots in slavery and slavery in capitalism. In accordance
with that William Julius Wilson tried to explore African
American experience within American capitalism. He
included a statement by Devah Pager (“American
sociologist known for her research on racial
discrimination”) said that high unemployment among
African-American is because most of them “possess a
prison record” which increases the paths of exploitation
and racial discriminations. In Beloved, Paul D and Denver
suffers from unemployment issues. We can confer from
this that contemporary problems of racial discrimination
and unemployment are legacy of slavery. Hillary Clinton,
“the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee” gave
a speech “Stronger Together” in Old State Capitol on
10November, 2016 in which she stated that black men
still “fear that their lives are disposable”. This statement
along with Donald Trump’s statement that “African
American communities are absolutely in the worst shape
that they’ve been before...ever, ever, ever” shows that
African American community is always on the
discriminated side and affirms that be it any century this
community struggles from the legacy of slavery and
racism.

IX. CONCLUSION
Beyond the shadow of doubt one can assert that
capitalism acts as a veil of reason for exploitation
and racism and sexism are seen as its byproducts. Toni
Morrison’s Beloved written in 1987 has actually
compelled readers and critics to peep into a palpable quest that what was the necessity for Toni Morrison to write about the events of exploitation that took place in 1850s and 1870s. Each and every slave character be it Paul D, Sethe or Baby Suggs all are haunted by their past which comes as a ghost in the novel named Beloved which spoils their present and threatens their future. This is what compelled Toni Morrison to create the Noble Prize winning novel Beloved in which she wanted to show that issues of slavery, ethnicity and capitalism has not yet been resolved for African-Americans in US. If they would have been resolved then in 2016, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump would not have addressed these crucial issues in their presidential speeches. Perhaps Toni Morrison with the mouthpiece of Sethe wanted to talk about this never ending exploitation in her argument that “even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to be always there for you” (Morrison 44). The reason I have used “Beloved” as such in the title is that this terminology becomes microcosm for the macrocosmic depiction of haunting past memories of dehumanization and exploitation of human rights.

REFERENCES