

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 argument 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 TRAFICKING, 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 snatching 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 of 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 dead 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 10 November, 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.

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