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Nawal Nagi

Communication Skills Trainer,

Sharda University,

New Delhi, India

navvee.17@gmail.com

Slavery and the African-American Family in Diaspora

Abstract: The Atlantic slave trade of the fifteenth to the nineteenth century which transferred slaves from Africa to the Americas led to a legacy of slavery which continued for many generations. This singular event in the history of the continent had profound corporal and psychological impact on these displaced people who were barely successful in finding a home away from home even after the abolition of slavery with the end of the American Civil War. This paper attempts to illustrate the affect of this episode on the smallest social unit of the family. It tries to bare the subtleties of the African-American family, the members of which suffer from a deep-rooted impact of their present and past which results in absent members, dysfunctional relationships, problematic associations, and etcetera. It, further, probes into the how the conventionally warm space of the family becomes something challenging for this African Diaspora to deal with. In order to achieve this end, this paper will make a study of the 1987 novel *Beloved* by the African-American writer Toni Morrison.

Keywords: slavery, motherhood, home, identity, memory, kinship, history, narratives

if you come from Africa, your name is gone....When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name?¹

The Atlantic slave trade that took place across the Atlantic Ocean from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, started after the explorations of the west coast of Africa by the Portuguese, and brought numerous slaves from the African colonies to the Americas. The slaves were brought to aid in the production of profitable crops like tobacco and the number increased after the development of new British-owned plantations in the continent. This slave trade was responsible for the forced relocation of about fifteen million Africans to the Americas and was thus responsible for the biggest deportation in history. The African Diaspora in the Americas consists majorly of the descendents of these ex-slaves.

The slave trade subjected the Africans to both physical and psychological torture due to its extremely inhuman conditions, an important example of which remains the middle passage in which Africans were transported like cargo across the Atlantic Ocean, in ships which were so densely packed that it left them no room for any kind of movement. They were not fed adequately and were treated as sub-humans devoid of the capability to feel anything. Such practices left a deep mark on psyche of the slaves which deprived them forever a normal existence. The direct impact of this dislocation, affliction and trauma was on the nature of their relationships and the unit of the family. The dynamics of the family of these people who have been subjected to years of torment is naturally different from the norm. Their relationships and associations are coloured with the distress of their present (as slaves) or by the strain of their past (as ex-slaves).

Beloved by the African-American author Toni Morrison is a novel set after the American Civil War and is based on the story of Margaret Garner, an African-American slave who broke out of slavery by escaping to Ohio, a free state. In the novel, the protagonist

¹ Morrison, Toni. Ed. Guthrie, Danille. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Sethe is a slave who flees to escape slavery and is recaptured after twenty eight days under the Fugitives Slave Act of 1850 which gave slave owners the right to pursue slaves across state borders. The central act of the novel is the gruesome murder by Sethe of her two-year old daughter in order to protect her from the fate which she had endured for years and which would now be assigned to her daughter as well.

The chief act of the novel brings to the surface the notion of black motherhood and makes one wonder if conventional happy motherhood is even a possibility for black women away from their land, in slavery. Motherhood, here, becomes a political enterprise. Under the practice of slavery, the African child is regarded as a commodity which limits the possibility of an uninterrupted motherhood. According to Sethe, “If I hadn’t killed her, she would have died and that is something I cannot bear to happen” (Morrison 67). Hannah More, further establishes this in her poem “Slavery: A Poem”²:

“Transmitted miseries , and successive chains,
The sole sad heritage her child obtains!
Ev'n this last wretched boon their foes deny,
To weep together, or together die.
By felon hands, by one relentless stroke,
See the fond links of feeling nature broke!” (8)

Further, School Teacher’s nephews violate her by taking the milk from her breasts. Jewell Parker Rhodes argues that Morrison extends the milk metaphor to underline that slavery “in making black women in particular (and black people, in general) a cash crop, denied the nurturance of black families.” Sethe gives up on Beloved and feeds Denver, her second daughter, with her blood-stained nipple. This mammary rape is a violation of her maternity. The novel becomes a fitting example of how slavery and the loss of a home denied these

² More, Hannah. “Slavery: A Poem”. London: Cadell, 1798. Accessed 17th Apr. 2017

women the right of nourishing their children and bringing up a natural family. Marianne Hirsch in her book *The Mother/Daughter Plot* argues that Sethe is a manifestation of an anger handed down from generations of such mothers.³

Sethe's relationships remain problematic not just in context of her gruesome murder of her daughter. The incident affects her other ties within the family too. Her murder of her daughter influences her relationship with her younger daughter Denver and her sons, who start to fear her. Her sons find it so arduous to live in the house haunted by their dead sister's presence that they end up fleeing away from it. Denver finds it challenging to accept her mother as the murderer of her sister, and also gets permanently isolated as she finds no one to bond with. Hence, when the supposed ghost of her sister returns to their home in the form of Beloved, she worries about her safety and resolves to protect her: "This time I have to keep my mother away from her" (Morrison 220).

Having discussed the consequences and impacts of Sethe's murder of her daughter, it is important to draw one's attention to the state of affairs in Sweet Home.⁴ When Sethe expresses her wish to have something closer to a proper wedding ceremony to commemorate her wedding, Mrs Garner, her owner, laughs at her wish. Sethe sews her wedding dress from stolen pillow case, a scorched scarf and discoloured mosquito netting. The point that Morrison brings home here is that the lives of these displaced people had nothing which was close to the norm, to such an extent that they find "no pain in hunger, and no heat in fire" (More 13). What we find here is a constant denial of the most basic of human privileges: a constant denial of 'life'. Caught in the web of slavery, Sethe and Paul D find it difficult to find enough time for love on weekdays. Further, Paul D had to "buy" (Morrison 167) his mother Baby Suggs freedom for her last years by working extra on Sundays.

³ Casear, Terry. "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". 1994. Accessed 16th April 2017.

⁴Sweet Home is the Kentucky plantation where Sethe, along with Baby Suggs and her sons, lived and worked in.

Morrison very poignantly depicts how the space of the Sweet Home never provided Sethe the space and liberty to love her children in her own way, without any limitations. Later in the novel, Paul D defines freedom as a place “where you could love anything you choose not to need permission for desire” (Morrison 237). Nancy Jesser in her essay “Violence, Home and Community in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” points out “While she had loved Halle at Sweet Home, she had been given permission to love him. She had loved her children because she had been allowed to raise them” (Jesser 329). The very fact that she required to be “allowed” (Jesser 329) to love her kin speaks a lot about the notion of freedom and choice in the lives of these people. If one does not own oneself, it is questionable whether he/she can ever indulge in the give and take dynamics that characterises every relationship. Sethe’s ability to love only comes full once she is emancipated. She says, “maybe I couldn’t love ‘em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love” (Morrison 278). More underlines this very predicament of the black family in exile.

“See the dire victim torn from social life,

The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife!

She, wretch forlorn! is dragg’d by hostile hands,

To distant tyrants sold, in distant lands!” (8)

How can the “shrieking babe” (More 8) or the “agonizing wife” (More 8) be expected to form a healthy association with anyone? They have no claim on themselves, for they are “to distant tyrants sold, in distant lands” (More 8).

Morrison attempts to underline how the geographical dislocation amounts to a loss of a space for the nourishment of a family because there is no space available now which they can call their own. The task of constructing a world of their own in a space which necessarily does not belong to them becomes challenging for them. Jesser, calls attention to how Sethe “performs small acts in an attempt to claim her world, ‘because she wanted to love the work

she did, to take the ugly out of it, and the only way she could feel at home on Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing things and took them with her.” According to Diaspora theorists Avtar Brah and Robin Cohen, the very idea of a home is something which exists only in the imagination. It is a place of desire and longing that fails to complement the present location of the immigrant.⁵ Homi Bhabha calls it “a third space, a hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and pregnant chaos.” More puts it in her poem as “The heav'n-taught fondness for the parent soil” (More 7). Slavery, further, makes things problematic in this case.

Each character in the novel is seen to be suffering from isolation. This isolation is not just with respect to other characters; it is an isolation from the self. In the words of Dana Heller, “Beloved’s relentless need, her demand to be seen or heard, constitute an outraged cry against this isolation.” The characters are unable to identify with themselves. Sethe, for example, is detached from herself because of her sexual violation, due to which she loses a great part of herself. Her murder of her daughter, too, does not let her live in peace for she is unable to absolve the guilt. Sethe’s husband, Halle, is isolated from himself because he is unable to come to terms with the fact that he was powerless in the face of Sethe’s violators and could do nothing to protect her. Paul D, too, loses a part of himself because of the affliction suffered under slavery, which leaves him disconnected from the self. Denver is suffering from loneliness because of the death of her sister and her attempted murder at the hands of her mother, which causes her to withdraw from the community, further stunting her development. It is interesting to notice that Denver quits school (because of being questioned about her mother’s crime) just when she is learning to write the letter “i”, that becomes symbolic of her selfhood which she remains unable to attain, just like she withdraws before mastering the letter “i”. By doing this, Denver not only gives up her association with the

⁵ Nayar, Promod. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*.2010. Accessed 15th April 2017

community, but “she abandons her studies of the English alphabet and the written word which in the period of Reconstruction represent freedom.”⁶ Her predicament also throws light on how the consequences of the forced dislocation and slavery are continued for generations.

People in diaspora are believed to be haunted by the memories of their past: memories of their ‘home’, a place which can only be aspired for. Memory can also be of the upsetting circumstances which they have had to face on account of having lost their ‘home’. In this novel, memory becomes important in the consideration of isolation of the characters. The characters are connected by memory to their pasts which, further, adds to their anguish, making it difficult for their wounds to heal. It is not surprising that Sethe believes that there is nothing better than to start the day’s work by “beating back the past” (Morrison 31) (a reference to her beating the dough). However, while Sethe and Paul D., are tormented by their memories, the idea of memory becomes a little different for Baby Suggs who hardly has any vivid memory of her kin left. All she has to hold on to are fragmented pieces of reminiscence. She is imbued with the grief of her four daughters and three sons and Morrison tells us that all she remembered of her eldest son was that he loved the burnt bottom of bread.

Jewel Parker Rhodes has defined ‘rememory’ as a revisionary process of memory, “of seeing things for what they were, not for what you thought them to be at the time” (Rhodes 77). Through rememory, Sethe comes to realize how Sweet Home devoid her of the desire to look for emancipation by their “blatant denial of the horror of slavery” (Rhodes 78). Rememory colours her perception of the past in the new light of her present.

Diaspora communities’ lives are overpowered by their history and their pasts which had somehow been different from their present. They have an active relationship with their pasts and they construct their present selves through a process of identifying and differing from their pasts. Sethe constructs her life on the backdrop of her rememory. Her relationship

⁶ Heller, Dana. “Reconstructing Kin: Family, History and Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” .1994. Accessed 15th April 2017

with Paul D. in the present is troubled by this rememory. When Paul D discovers Sethe's murder of her daughter, he is quick to remind her of being a human: "You got two feet Sethe, not four." (Morrison 197) Further, the characters' sense of self are greatly influenced by their former times. Paul D. especially, experiences a loss of personhood which can be compared to emasculation. The animal-like treatment meted out to him is a wound on his ego which he interprets as a loss of his manhood. His very name becomes an indicator of his dehumanisation.⁷

It is important to note that his disruption of normal life continues in the lives of these displaced people for generations. In the novel, we come across three generations of disordered family life: Baby Suggs, Sethe and Denver. Dana Heller defines family as "a process of reading a history of interpretive acts that are unique to each kinship group despite its ties to the larger cultural community" (Heller 110). Asserting kinship would, hence, require sharing in a common language and reading the symbols to make meanings in a language which is as fractured as their relationships. This constitutes the essential textuality of a family which is curbed and kept in check under the institution of slavery, and makes insignificant the identity of a person. This denial of the autonomy to exchange meanings is a denial to form a family.⁸

The tree on Sethe's back is a symbol of the affliction she had been through. Her body, hence, becomes the text which recounts history and the only way she can reclaim herself, for herself and her family is by appropriating the power of interpretation, "to suffer the past on her own terms" (Heller 113). The scar also becomes important because it unites Sethe with one of the very few memories she has of her mother. Sethe remembers that as a child she was

⁷ The brothers are named Paul D., Paul A., Paul F. denying them the basic right of an identity by a distinct name.

⁸ Heller, Dana. "Reconstructing Kin: Family, History and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*".1994. Accessed 15th April 2017

taught by her mother to recognise her by the mark of a circle and a cross burnt in the skin on her rib. The mark is nothing but a brand used to mark ownership and it is through this mark that Sethe is taught to recognise her mother which is, indeed, extremely ironic. Young Sethe, reads the mark as her family name, “the only she has ever been taught to recognise” (Heller 113) and the absence of the mark on her body makes her feel a lack of association with her mother. Ironically, the very mark which she perceives as an indicator of family tie is the mark which essentially establishes the bitter reality that her mother is not truly her mother: she is a mere commodity in a system which indulges in an exchange of such products. On being asked to be marked the same way as her mother, young Sethe receives a slap from her mother. Thus, both Sethe and her mother attempt “to save their children from the mark of slavery, to put them someplace where they will be safe” (Heller 112).

Having talked about the tussle of these people with their life and their relationships, it becomes imperative to examine their survival in the hostile conditions which the new land impresses upon them. Diaspora communities have always endeavoured to keep native culture and ethos alive in the host countries; African-Americans, however, do it in a unique way. They place significance on the remembering and retelling of the immediate and the distant past to safeguard their culture and strengthen the ties in the family. The very memories which haunt their survival, when retold in the form of narratives function as a remedy to their struggle and unite the family with a sentiment of collective suffering. Thus, “history and memory, both individual and collective, are precisely the intertwining forces that construct, and at the same time threaten to destroy, the kinship group” (Heller 115). The novel vouches for the same as is evident in *Beloved*'s ravenous need to know about Sethe's past. It is, thus, through this process of story-telling that Sethe nurtures *Beloved* back to recovery.

Sethe's nursing of *Beloved* through her stories also throws light on the distinctive and additional role that women play in these communities in preserving and safeguarding their

family life “through the protection of their children, their men and the community” (Ferguson 114) and through preservation of their culture⁹. The absence of the father, who has usually been sold, is a common recurrence in these families which make the woman the head of the house. Gay Wilentz examines that the African women in the Americas track a convention which has been bequeathed to them by their African foremothers. She writes:

“Although enslaved these women storytellers carried their culture with them in the form of songs, tales and legends. Struggling to maintain generational continuity in spite of the breakup of families they also maintain cultural continuity- telling stories of opposition late into the night, since tales of escape or African life were punishable offenses in slave systems.” (393)

The play *Anowa* by Ghanaian author and poet Ama Ata Aidoo is also based on a fable narrated to her by her mother. These tales become a source of strength as well as a medium to reflect and redefine their culture and facilitate to “keep alive the ancestral ‘notion of song’” (Wilentz 395). Hannah More’s poem too places importance on this ‘song’:

“Strange pow’r of song! the strain that warms the heart
Seems the same inspiration to impart;”

Postcolonial studies view this as symbolic of a sense of collective unity, the realization of which becomes imperative in Diaspora communities.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that in *Beloved*, it is Paul D. who is frequently seen singing, which empowers him to face his past and make peace with his dehumanizing experiences.¹¹ It is worth wondering that why does Morrison relegate this task, which is usually realized by the women of the house, to Paul D. This makes sense in the light of Paul D.’s lost manhood owing to his slave experience.

⁹ Heller, Dana. “Reconstructing Kin: Family, History and Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” .1994. Accessed 15th April 2017

¹⁰ Nayar, Promod. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*.2010. Accessed 15th April 2017

¹¹ Capuano, Peter. “Truth in Timbre: Morrison’s Extension of Slave Narrative Song in *Beloved*” . 2003. Accessed 27th March 2017

Having discussed significantly about the family of slaves and ex-slaves in Diaspora, the paper would like to conclude with Dana Heller's alternative definition of these families, which transcends the conventional implication which we derive out of it. Placing emphasis on the community, Heller argues that in these families children were rarely brought up by their biological parents and, therefore, insecure familial structures also become crucial so that the children could be entrusted to someone else if the parents happened to be sold away. In the words of Heller, "In this sense, 'family' came to mean a structure of relations capable of transcending blood kin to form an extended family including neighbours and friends" (Heller 113).

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