

**A “BLACK FACE” QUALIFIED AS NEWS IN A WHITE NEWSPAPER
BUT THE STORY DIDN’T BELONG TO HER: TRACING HUMAN
RIGHTS AND VOICING SLAVED MOTHERHOOD IN TONI
MORRISON’S *BELOVED***

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*I am accused of tending to the past
as if I made it,
as if I sculpted it
with my own hands. I didn't.
this past was waiting for me
when I came,
a monstrous unnamed baby,
and I with my mother's itch
took it to the breast
and named it
History.
- Lucille Clifton(Quilting: Poems)*

Abstract

*Human Rights Literature is an academic genre that not only brings to the forefront the concept of 'engaged literature' put forward by French writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in his work called What is Literature? but also subtly investigates the whole gamut of human rights violations inherent therein. This paper examines the sub-human experience of scorned and condemned motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* where an African-American woman chooses to undercut history which barely allowed her to go beyond the "geometric oppression"¹ to narrate her story in her way. Further, this paper tries to correlate this victimization and mutilation of black lives and the nuances imbibed in the Black's fight for survival rights to the social movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM).*

Keywords

Human Rights, Slavery, Motherhood, Black Lives Matter.

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To achieve this aim, the paper has been organized into three sections where the first section particularly deals with Morrison's *Beloved* and its treatment of African-American slavery, 'middle passage' and vociferous use of Enlightenment in the silencing of the "other" (like the silencing of the mad).² Then the next section questions the commodification of the human body especially of the female Negroes who are threefold marginalized. This passage also brings home the questioned motherhood (of Sethe, the major protagonist in Morrison's *Beloved*) and the rights one asserts over "An-other's" body. Further, this section ululates and lambastes the ancient history of human rights infringements and the legacy of slavery in the 1980s that engulfed African-American female slaves like Sethe, Baby Suggs and many others and rendered them emotionally antagonized to the extent that no enfranchisement rights were able to compensate the loss. The paper then ends with the third section along with a conclusion that harkens back to the aforementioned movement and thus tries to breathe life into the forgotten past which is not entirely bypassed and is still ferociously trying to make its presence felt. The cases of Blacks still getting murdered in America accentuates Sethe's statement about Beloved's death which she found "soft as cream" since she believed "being alive was the hardest part" (Morrison 2010: 8). Thus here we can witness that personal has become political and the past is still present to sully the future. Therefore the last words of the novel, "This is not a story to pass on" signifies both acceptance and denial, acceptance of the horrors of the middle passage and the fates ascribed to Afro-Americans without their approval nor rejection of "memory" where neither African-Americans want to reminisce their enslavement and mayhem inflicted on their mortal bodies nor Americans whose Fugitive Slave Laws uprooted even the humblest limits of humanity (324,189).

Beloved (1987) is not merely a neo-slave narrative that capitalizes on the workings of plantocracy that denied Blacks basic human and civil rights but it is, as Morrison says, more of a larger framework that traces "those anonymous people called slaves" (cited in Anglo). It is not the tale of "Sixty Million and more" people who perished during the middle passage which makes the story heart rendering but the reader's fear of being erased and forgotten like them does (Morrison 2010:epigraph). This erasure and disappearance of black's identity which is quite parallel to the Jewish Holocaust, are also the two major tropes that form the basis of my argument in this paper. The Middle Passage which served the triangular purpose of commerce where sugar, tobacco and slaves were imported from Africa to Europe and America, also speaks of the so-called cultivated ethics of enlightenment from the "Light" of Africa (Tally 2009a: XV).

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* too, effectively illumines this same exploitation of survival rights when slaves who "sickened, became inefficient . . . were then allowed to crawl away and rest" where "rest" ironically symbolizes their death since their dead bodies were no more than the debris of colonial modernization (Conrad 19). In this paper, I tried to re-locate the silence of the blacks that shrouded the middle passage due to their inability to partake in the discourse of Enlightenment created by many thinkers and philosophers of the 'Age of Enlightenment' including Hume, Kant etc. The 'Age of Enlightenment' (1721-1820) which associated the idea of literacy with reasoning and logic and enunciated them as the sole envoy of humanity, created a hierarchy that placed slaves and Negros at the bottom of the scale due to their inability to participate in this discourse. Morrison herself talked about the link of 'Enlightenment' with humanity in the context of Blacks, quite evident when she says "Literacy was a way of assuming and proving the 'humanity' that the constitution denied them [Blacks]" (Bragg 189). "They were supposed to be a kind of Rousseau's *tabula-rasa* on which the "cultivated" whites, steeped in the tradition of writing and records, could imprint their own "knowledge" and cultural bias" (Tally 2009b: 35). This statement nonetheless perfectly articulates the enforced silence which made Blacks an object of scrutiny for whites.

Beloved is one such novel that serves as a counterpart to this silencing of the "Other" and comes up with a character, Sethe, who is not only capable enough of taking possession of butchering her infant but can boldly speak of "safety with a hand-saw" (Morrison 2010: 193). I shall now endeavor to direct my paper towards the very idea of 'possession' and 'claim' over another's body, especially in the light of the statement made by Morrison about Sethe's killing of her baby, "It was the right thing to do," she says in an interview, "but it was also the thing you have no right to do" (Rothstein C17).

The story which Morrison weaves in *Beloved* is based on an 1885 newspaper account of a slave woman called Margaret Garner who ran away from Kentucky to escape the Fugitive Slave Laws. But the moment she sensed her recapture as per the same laws, she throttled her child rather than allow it a life of servitude which she had tasted well enough. Sethe fulfills the obligation to ensure her child's safety when she slit her baby's throat and boldly declares "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison 2010: 193). Now the major argument is, how far Sethe's claim over her child is justified when read in parallel to the white's claim over a Negro slave? And what does it mean when Morrison writes "For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (54). Answering these questions which closely talk about

a mother-child relationship, I tried to explore in this section of the paper, the psychological understanding of a mother who is sure enough that "nobody was going to nurse her [Beloved] like me" and "... nobody had her milk but me"(19). This firm proclamation on Sethe's behalf is probably the result of the "consciousness of a mother"³ whose body broke in half, bones pulled apart and re-aligned to give her child a life. Therefore nobody except the mother could understand the pain and sufferings of her child and likewise, nobody except Sethe could have known "... to keep them [children] away from what I know is terrible" (194).

Sethe is a blood and flesh victim of the terrible tale of slavery and her first-hand experience of slavery is indisputable. She stands as testimony to the white's possession of a female Afro-American slave under the Fugitive Bill which gave sovereignty and autonomy to the slave owners to even steal the milk of a pregnant and lactating woman and dehumanize her beyond the levels of recovery. For victimizers, she was just a piece of property that could be easily sold and repurchased as well as exploited time and again. That is why, she lays claim over her baby or rather to save the child from this barbarity and savagery. She strangled her child in front of the out-hurter and made sure that, "... no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper"(296). Slavery is "terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women; superadded to the burden common to all, they have sufferings and mortification peculiar to their own."(Brent 405). Sethe was altogether conscious of her enslaved motherhood and the denial of selfhood to a slave and therefore, she wanted "to get to a place where [she] could love anything . . . not to need permission for desire . . . that was freedom [for her]" (Morrison 2010: 191). So she took and put her love beyond mortal paradigms. Not only Sethe but Baby Suggs and Sethe's mother are examples of this neglected mother-infant bond and are epitomes who bring to the forefront the trope of "mother and mother dispossessed"⁴. Baby Suggs in the novel bolsters the extent of the void that only a remembrance can fill and it becomes quite apparent when she says, "I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased . . . that's all I remember" (6). Here, what a used-to-be slave woman can claim as her possession is not her children but only a recollection of the memory. Baby Suggs is already aware of the rights one can assert over "An-other's" body be it her child or someone else and therefore preaches a different idea of love where she fortifies that "More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts . . . love your heart. For this is the best prize" (104). This notion of claim and possession is re-strengthened by Paul D later in the novel when Sethe after losing the flesh and blood re-incarnation of Beloved, goes crippled by a sense of loss and laments altogether, "She [Beloved]

was my best thing” and Paul D mollifies her injured motherhood by reclaiming selfhood: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.”(321-322).

The third section of the paper calls for attention to the political façade adopted towards black victimization which permeates black lives thus rendering human rights, a mere subject of discourse for the “Occident”. This Occident as discussed by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* uses Michael Foucault’s concept of discourse and talks about the otherness with which colonialism as a process of enlightenment controlled the Orient. Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony explicitly highlights this “Oriental silence” which is also manifested in Morrison’s *Beloved* when Paul D didn’t believe that the picture printed in the white newspaper was of Sethe (Said 211). The argument which follows from the above incident is exactly the one that has been raised in the title of the paper, which admonishes, only white’s interpretation of Sethe’s act of strangling her baby. The news painted his [victimizer’s] story but where was her [victimize’s] story? Had she given a chance she could have had a different story to tell. Paul D over and again mentions Sethe’s “mouth” while reading the news: “This ain’t her mouth. I know her mouth and this ain’t it” (Morrison 2010: 183). Thus, this being not her “mouth” ironically indicates that this is not her story where she could argue the terms and conditions that compelled her to snatch away her child’s right to survive. This enforced silence of an African American slave then becomes vocal in her passionate refusal to let her child live under the school teacher and outrageously murdering her with no regrets to follow. The major concern in this section is to highlight this ‘other’ side of the story where blacks are stripped of their right to narrate the story in their own way. This argument brings with itself the problem of ‘Racism’ which blacks like Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Halle and others suffered in antiquity and a lot more people continue to suffer.

Toni Morrison’s first play *Dreaming Emmett* is also based on a real-life incident of a 14-year-old African American boy who living with his uncle in Mississippi, visits a store with his cousins to buy bubble gum. After their purchase, Emmett wished goodbye to the lady behind the counter in a very civilized way, while his cousin informed him, “Hey, don’t you know you’re not supposed to say goodbye to a white woman?” Before he could answer, another of them praised her beauty followed by Emmett’s whistle of agreement. This innocent conversation ignited some white men who were playing poker nearby and overheard this and after three days, Emmett’s dead body was found in a river so brutally mutilated that it took her mother to verify him from a ring he wore. And of course, this incident is believed to be one of the glimmers that enthused the Civil Rights Movement. Morrison cites Emmett Till’s death to draw attention to the atrocities inflicted on

black youth and told the *New York Times*, "There are these young black men getting shot all over the country today, not because they were stealing but because they're black. And no one remembers how any of them looked. No one even remembers the facts of each case" (Sanna 23).

This same lynching and murdering of African-American youth is again illuminated by an international activist movement called Black Lives Matter (BLM), which started three years back on 13th July 2013. BLM regularly, protests against the extra-judicial killings of black youths and detainment without fair legal trials. It talks about grave issues concerning blacks' security in the United States of America and the racial inequality practiced by their criminal justice system. The movement which began in 2013 with the use of hashtag #BlackLivesMatter by Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza has now earned worldwide recognition and is drawing attention towards the denial of civil rights to Blacks and their branding as anti-national. Though the movement is not completely detached from criticism and has its nuances the step to safeguard Afro-Americans and protect their basic human rights seems appreciable. Therefore, I put this paper to a closure on a note that time and again demands to conjure the past to recreate a future where human rights violations can be criticized at their best.

Notes

1. The term "geometric oppression" used by Barbara Smith indicates the triple marginalization of black women based on their class, gender and race.
2. This silencing of the "Other" calls back Edward Said's *Orientalism* where he aptly writes "In Orientalist discourse, Europe is capable of speech while the Orient is mute; therefore Europe speaks for the Orient." This paints Orient as dependent and more of a childlike figure incapable of self-rule. Moreover, this "Other" also directs attention towards Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* which examines women as the second sex, the other of the male, thus relegating them to a more passive and subordinated space.
3. Here, it is important to note that the "consciousness of being a mother" is different from any other "female consciousness". While one speaks of the first-hand experience of being a mother and thus also of the pain and sufferings inherent therein, the latter is more about the awareness of female victimization from a distance.
4. This term is used in the context of African-Americans by Hortense Spillers in an essay entitled "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe!"

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