Toni Morrison’s Beloved and The Bluest Eye:
A Saga of Untold Suffering

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Abstract
The objective of this article is to find out the untold oppression and the inexplicable plight of the slaves in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and The Bluest Eye. Toni Morrison has been very objective and down to earth in portraying the vicious picture of slavery in these two novels. In a comparative and analytical method, this article presents the mental and physical agony and racial tension that the slaves have undergone in their real life situations. The atrocity of slavery is manifold. Displacement, isolation, oppression and violence are the commonest things that they had been subjected to. They have lost their true identity and have been reduced to non-human entity. Beloved and The Bluest Eye are Morrison’s best novels which disclose the painful stories of slavery and its aftermath.

Keywords: Trauma, Slavery, Subjugation, Racism, Sexism

Introduction
Beloved is Toni Morrison’s most read, most acclaimed and extensively acknowledged creation for all time in which she gives voice to previously silenced stories. Here the sincere author demonstrates how history is not over and done with. Rather she gives the readers a scope to revise, re-visualize and remember the most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African people. More deeply and thoroughly, this novel penetrates the psychic consequences of slavery than any historical document. It is not about slavery as an institution, it is about those nameless people who were identified as the slaves and are both subjects of and subject to the black history.

Although the ending of slavery in the history of the U.S.A. somehow improved the tough conditions of slaves, still they were not acknowledged as normal human beings in society. Emancipation brought neither freedom nor relief from the black stigma of color to the African Americans. They were still considered as slaves and indentured servants. Rather the physically unattractive, intellectually incompetent and spiritually degraded black psyche always remained preoccupied with the daily struggle for existence; ghetto living, frustration of ambition in the professions, irksome separate entrances and exits at public places, police terror and torture, house arrest, banishment, jail life, etc. Deprivation of human dignity, loss, hatred and the physical violence made the Black life much more harassing.

This psychological harassment caused a fragmentation of the self and a loss of true identity. In this sense, slavery splits a person into a fragmented and wrecked figure and sometimes non-human; different from a normal human.

This reduction of human to non-human was the first step towards the establishment of racism in the white American civilization which led to the systematic oppression and economic exploitation of people who are not classified as ‘white’. It threatens the African American nation with its cruelty, injustice and dominance, and made the life mean, degrading and traumatically cruel by its dominant modes of repression, isolation, deprivation and imprisonment to which all African Americans owed unquestioning allegiance. Racism prevented the black people from attaining social equality with whites, and made them dead, impotent and under complete control. Legally or socially sanctioned privileges and rights in matters of education, immigration, voting rights, citizenship, land acquisition and criminal procedure were given to white Americans that were not granted to Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic and Latino Americans just because the color of their skin.

As an American writer of African ancestry, and living in a racially articulated and predicated world, Toni Morrison regards “blackness” as a theme that has often been associated with slavery, suffering and misfortune with reference to the African Americans in general and the characters of her fiction in particular. The frightful twin issues of racism and sexism are the major contributing factors for the traumatic lives led by the African Americans.

Throughout history, slavery has been in existence, which spreads and touches almost every culture, nationality and religion, from ancient times to the present days. Violence, torture, cruelty, inhuman or degrading treatment, punishment is the common scourges connected with sla-
very, which are done to infuse terror, to dehumanize and demean, to assert power and control. It constitutes severe pain or suffering whether physical or mental. Shackling on the wrists, ankles or neck to prevent escape, branding irons on palm, shoulder, abdomen or face for identification purpose or as a punishment, brutal whipping to the young, old, male, female, child, including pregnant women slaves to control the behavior, and rubbing pepper, salt or other hard substances like pickle, lime juice, hot brine or turpentine on the wounds to leave permanent scars was the routine life of a slave. Sometimes the ruthlessness of sexual assault, mutilation, amputation, genital torture and castration leave the victims damaged or dead. Again the cruel executions like lynching, burning, hanging the slaves alive just for a measure of punishment make the situation worse.

This institution corrodes love between black men and women, fractures families and destroys mothers’ dreams for their children. It never allowed the black family to exist as a single unit consisting of wife, husband and children sometimes deliberately and sometimes capriciously. Slavery separated men of fatherhood. Unknowingly cut off from half of humanity, fathers were used not taking care of their children and did not have any obligations towards their women. Gradually, fathers’ emotional lives were disturbed and they were unable to return to the way their lives were before slavery. Unable to confront the white oppressor, the black male takes out his failure and frustration on his partner. Thus the black woman becomes a slave’s slave and the master-slave relationship enters into the domestic world.

H.J. Nieboer Describes in his book Slavery as an Industrial System that a slave is the property of somebody else and politically and socially he is at a lower level than the mass of people who performs compulsory labor. Transported to America on slave ships under inhuman conditions, these alien beings were treated by the white race as less than human, more akin to the wild beasts of Africa than to the human species. Slavery, as such a life threatening, non-nurturing force, existed even now, thus becoming the forum for all types of discussion. She relates these disturbing moments of the past, refusing to look away from the tragedies that form the African American history.

Freedom was a foreign issue for them which were never to be achieved. It was conceived of as a thing which could be bought and owned as many times. They were destined to lead a life of a slave and slavery was their only right. Being born into slavery meant one would be a slave for the rest of one’s life. This country was founded on principles of equal rights, although many groups like Native Americans, people of African origin and women were excluded from access to rights. So, when the founding fathers of the constitution wrote that “all men are created equal”, it might be clear to them that Black men and women were not created equal and that “all men” meant “white men”. Liberty was something set aside for the whites. In the book, entitled They Take our Jobs: And 20 Other Myths about Immigration, Aviva Chomsky describes:

In every generation, people have found rationales for systems of social and legal inequality. Native Americans had no rights in the new country, so their land could be taken for white settlement. Africans had no rights, so it was all right to enslave them. Women had no rights, and their labor was generally unpaid. Contract workers had few rights, and their labor was underpaid. Immigrants as well as workers in other countries have also been deprived of rights—yet their low paid labor provides the cheap products that our economy depends on. (xiii).

Insufficient or no food for days, lack of freedom and no funeral after death was attached to the fate of the slaves. How many slaves bought as property and how many children born to the female slaves as profit was only a matter of consideration and estimation. Even the slave traders and owners exchanged and exported young slaves among themselves as gift items on their festive days. The human cargo was kidnapped, captured, chained, beaten, silenced, packed, sealed and parceled from one destination to another. But exactly how many slaves lost during transportation and how many died from hard work, torture and punishment was never counted. Their death was never consoled and the death rate was registered only as an approximation.

Toni Morrison’s Beloved is dedicated to “Sixty million and more”. This phrase “Sixty million and more” refers to the estimated number of the African slaves rounded up for the slave trade who either died while waiting for transportation or who died during the passage on the slave ships. Although this figure is not accurate, still it holds the most reliable educated guess that Morrison could find. Through this estimation, Morrison is trying to find out the full story of the slave trade, much of which has been ignored, left behind or simply lost. Jan Furman in his Toni Morrison’s Fiction describes:

Of these millions, Morrison writes, No one praised them, nobody knows their names, and nobody can remember them, not in the United States or Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore (85).

Beloved recollects the whereabouts of all the ‘disremembered and unaccounted for’ that fell victim to this African American genocide. Through this novel, the
The writer hoped, as she says, to bridge “the gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present. This novel is about disruption, unsettling, rearrangement and breaking point which reflect the dreadful effects of slavery for women and men in America. In this fiction, the slave protagonist, Sethe comes to represent all of the souls lost during slavery. The never ending loss is beautifully portrayed in this novel.

Through the picture of Sethe, Morrison attempts to expose a truth about the inner life of the historical figure Margaret Garner who attempted to kill all four of her children when her slave owner found her. And she succeeded in killing one child, a baby girl. In this fiction, Sethe is a woman of inner strength who has survived the brutality which was a common aspect of slavery. The experience of being a female slave terrorizes her that her children will suffer this as well. That is why Sethe attempts to run for Ohio leaving the Sweet Home plantation. She has already sent her three children ahead of her, and she herself was six months pregnant. She walks many miles for the sake of freedom and despite the imprint of the chokecherry tree on her back, she is able to deliver Denver with the help of a white girl, Amy Denver. After that she crosses the Ohio River and enters the Free State Ohio. She needs her children to be free and refuses to accept the “silence second class status”. Being a mother, she struggles to save her children from a predictable brutal future. Unfortunately, in Ohio she spends only twenty eight days of freedom with her children, mother-in-law and neighbors and is able to be a mother of her children for the first time in her life. She comes to know what it is like to have choices and not to always be told what to do. For the first time, she redefines her children as her own rather than as commodities to be used by the slave owners. As her fate denies it, Schoolteacher arrives Ohio in search of them. At the sight of the slave catchers Sethe’s mother love overwhelms her. She wants to kill her children, but does not succeed in killing all but one, her two year old daughter. She slashes her infant daughter’s throat rather than see her in chains. The scene of this horrible incident is described as follows: “Two were lying open-eyed in saw-dust, a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one—“(11). After this incident, Howard and Buglar were nursed back to health by their grandmother. When she completed her imprisonment, she still has some satisfaction: “I stopped him; I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (164). In New York Times article, Morrison stated, “Killing was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it” (qtd. In Mervyn Rothstein).

According to Kashinath Ranveer, No doubt, what was done by Sethe could be wrong in the eyes of moralists, but she did it because she was surrounded by the most immoral and unjust world where justice and self-respect could not be restored except by way of injustice and self-destruction. Thus she moves from the state of total ignorance and unawareness about herself towards the state of totally awakened self. This awareness is achieved at a painful cost…. (249).

Baby Sugg’s painful experiences also provide insight into the complexities of mother love during slavery. She has eight children by six different fathers and all of her children are taken away by the vagaries of slavery except her son Halle, who eventually buys her freedom by working on his free Sundays for five years without ever having experienced freedom. Two of her daughters vanished so quickly that she cannot even say good bye to them. Halle is twenty five when he buys his sixty year’s old mother’s freedom. Due to Halle’s extraordinary sacrifice, Baby Suggs achieved approximately ten years of freedom. Her freedom means abandoning and sacrificing the one child she has known the longest. When she crosses the River into free territory, she realizes for the first time that her body, particularly her beating heart belongs to her, although physically and emotionally she was left handicapped by slave life. Trudier Harris observes that having given up seven of her eight children to slavery, Baby Suggs knows what it means to have put the heart back together after it has been torn apart value by value. She tolerated all torture that came up to her. But when it was up to Sethe, and when Sethe killed her own flesh out of agony, Baby Suggs dismissed all the hope. “Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed”, she concluded, “and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but white folks”.

Black woman was the most affected of all due to the multiple identities of being black, female and poor which has haunted and tormented her. Physically weak, economically broken and socially segregated, this creature finds no way to define herself, to make a family, to shower her motherhood upon her children and to prove her existence. Due to the racial, gender and class oppression that black women experience, they cannot share same neighborhoods, same schools or same sort of domestic jobs to secure their survival, which have pushed them towards a margin. As a victim of slavery, she is thoroughly exploited by her master and as a female, she is also exploited by the male slaves. A female slave is not good enough to get a mention even in the books of God. She is an instrument of sport for the men – both black and white. They have been used simultaneously as slaves and servants and as whores and workers by white men for nearly four hundred years, including the contemporary present. In literature, the black woman figure has been depicted as black in color, fat, nurturing, religious, kind, strong, enduring and timid who needs or demands little and her identity derived mainly from a nurturing service as she is there as cook, housekeeper,
nurse maid, seamstress and mistress as the story of slavery is in her blood. In contrast, the white woman is supposed to be frail, alabaster white, incapable of doing hard works, shimmering with the beauty of fragile crystal, as observed by Barbara Christian.

Since blackness is so utterly alien to the white dominant world, Individual unspoken experience, unshared and unspoken dominates the household scenes. Women and children, especially girls are the typical victims of violence, both overt and covert. It includes domestic violence, brutality in sexual encounters and victimization of children. These black women had to be suffered at the hands of both white and black men, fighting a battle for survival both inside and outside their homes. Due to this racial and sexist oppression, they are constantly marginalized and confined in a pitiful state of nothingness. This double burden is best featured and examined in Morrison’s debut novel The Bluest Eye. In this book, it has been revealed that the self-hatred, torture and harassment are not because of poverty or hardship, but because of historical based tendency of slavery and white culture to promote its own superiority. According to Smith, “The Bluest Eye examines the complex economic, historical, cultural and geographic factors that problematize relations within the black community and the world beyond” (721). In this book, the black women are beset with sexism, racism and alienation. Sexist oppression is projected through the vulgar actions of the character of Cholly Breedlove. In order to cup the feeling of self-defeat, fear and frustration in a white-dominated society, Cholly compensates this feeling by brutally beating and mistreating both his wife and daughter. He like a patriarch monkey, again, comes later to rape his eleven-year-old daughter in a state of drunkenness, exactly as it normally happens in the animal world. Pauline, Cholly’s wife is economically exploited on the basis of her subordinate race and minor gender. She is compelled to choose between her husband and work represents a situation in which the black woman is seen as an economic slave by the dominant white society. The sexist oppression of Pauline by Cholly takes the form of beatings and violent behavior:

Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand. She fell in a sitting position…He put his foot on her chest…he struck her several times in the face…Mrs. Breedlove took advantage of this momentary suspension of blows and slipped out of his reach (321).

In this context, H. Carby highlights the condition of black women as working labor in her article,” “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood”:

What does the concept of reproduction mean in a situation where black women have done domestic labor outside of their own homes in the servicing of white families? In this example they lie outside of the industrial wage relation but in a situation where they are providing for the reproduction of black labor in their domestic sphere. (Qtd. In Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997, p.115)

Carby’s words reflect the economic status of Pauline. What affected her standard of living is the economic oppression based on racism which she has to tolerate in her society. One of her bad and sad memories of racism and sexism is when her white employer compels her to choose either between her work and her husband: “She said she would let me stay if I left him. I thought about that. But later on it didn’t seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman. She didn’t give me the eleven dollars she owed me, neither. That hurt bad” (369). This leads Carby to relate racism with sexism. He argues, “Racism and sexism are similar. Ideologically for example, they both construct common sense through reference to ‘natural’ and ‘biological’ differences.” (Henry and Ingraham, 1997, p.116) Racism and sexism are intertwined and interdependent as black male takes advantage of his biological strength to oppress his woman at home, very much like the way the whites get privilege over blacks by their white skin. Similar to her mother, Pecola Breedlove lacks self-esteem and she is victimized by patriarchal oppression represented by her own father, Cholly, who molests her and brings her to the very state of madness. Pecola’s tragedy is based on skin-hatred and a dream to be beautiful. Her day-dream of having “the blue eyes” so that she will be loved in her family, school and society- strongly reflects the influence of the omnipresent racism. Racism compels her to try to beautify her race, which she visualizes as ugly and inferior. The ideology of “beauty” is concerned with Pecola “trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk…her teacher had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and, called on her only when everyone was required to respond. She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she would say, “Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! “and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused” (39). Then she understands “if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights- if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say beautiful, she herself would be different” (40).

Conclusion

This is how both the novels explain the disaster of the protagonists for being black. Race and color have ruined the black life from childhood to adulthood. Escapism
from this ill-managed society is not easy to be achieved for them. Death brings the only beam of hope to be away and rest for ever. Sethe gets exhausted from living in the present and life becomes unbearable for her. At the beginning of the novel, when she is talking with Paul D, she mentions, “I will never run from another thing on this earth… No more running-from nothing” (18). Years ago, for blacks the legacy of slavery was property, fear of whites and powerlessness within the social system. What happens to individuals in an institutionalized slave system in which African Americans had to live in the past is a matter of concern. Morrison’s fictions depict the gap between the status of humanity and the status of property, stealing or being stolen, freeing and being freed, repossessing and hauntingly claiming. The list of gaps and forgetting might go on. But Morrison’s novels compel us to remember the ugliest part of the American past. Slavery has left its scars very deeply and nothing in this world can compensate the loss, absence and havoc it played.

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