

Thingification of African Slaves: An Aimé Césairean Analysis of *Beloved*

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the detrimental impact of slavery on the Africans who were forced to leave Africa to work as slaves in America during the 19th century. In spite of the fact that the American Civil War between the pro-slavery South and the anti-slavery North of 1861-65 gave the Black Africans independence, they were still the marginalized victims. In order to examine the horror of rape, enslavement, domination, beating, inferiority complex and the destruction of African language as well as family, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is scrutinized in the light of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. The heinous misdeeds of the white colonizers led to infanticide by African raped victims like Sethe who is hemmed in by the juggernaut white rule. Baby Suggs, Ella, Sethe's mother and Sethe are sexually abused. Atrocities of colonialism kill Sixo, Paul A, and chains Paul D resulting in their immense suffering and the psychological turmoil of Africans did not end even after they got emancipation in the late 90s. Relations of domination and submission due to slavery have dehumanizing effects on the lives of African descent slaves and this paper aims at throwing light on the inert African slaves who are shorn of their land, family, and sense of self under the appalling encroachment of slavery in post-civil war.

Keywords: *Atrocities of colonialism, Domination, Dehumanization, Emancipation, Enslavement, Slavery*

Introduction: Martinique-born writer, and politician Aimé Césaire (26 June 1913 – 17 April 2008) hates the French rule in Martinique. *Discourse on Colonialism* (*Discourse* was originally published in French as *Discours sur le colonialisme* in 1950) is his protest against the brutalities inflicted on the colonized people of this world. He mentions in his interview with René Depestre [1] that the Martinicans lived in an atmosphere of rejection and developed an inferiority complex and that is why he always thought that the black man was searching for his identity which can develop if Blacks develop a concrete consciousness of the first fact that they are black [1]. Along with Senegalese Leopold Senghor whom he met in Paris and his childhood friend Guianan Léon Damas he gave birth to the *négré*, a word symbolizing that black skin is beautiful. The *Négritude* movement in the 1930s dismisses all untrue occidental ideals. The goal of *Négritude* is to recover the history of Africa's accomplishments [2]. Turning to American author Toni Morrison (18 February 1931- 2019), we can see that she writes her novels in order to depict the lives of black people [3]. So, Morrison remains a speaker for all the African- American children and she tries to subvert the idea that white is beautiful.

As far as slavery is concerned, Du Bois argues that from 1680 to 1688, 249 ships sailed to Africa, importing 60,783 Negro slaves, after losing 14, 387 on the middle passage while crossing the Atlantic Ocean [4]. The experiences of sixty million and more African slaves of sun-slit days in the hull of the ship with thirst and crouching death through the middle passage [5] manifest racial victimization. American author Toni Morrison (18 February 1931-) adds that the colonizers packed 800 in a ship if they had promised to deliver 400 assuming that half would die [4]. She writes *Beloved* [6] to fictionalize the true story of an African slave named Margaret Garner who is arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill others) rather than let them return to the owner's plantation [7]. She attempted the murder of her four children – successfully killing only her baby daughter when she was caught as a fugitive [8]. In her interview with *Race Today Review* in 1985 Morrison reveals that her main aim in writing this novel is to bear witness to a history that is unrecorded, and untaught in mainstream education [9]. She writes *Beloved* as she figures out that if those people can live through it, then she can also write about it [10]. In other words, the novel serves as a record of the traumas of these African slaves in 19th century USA.

Analysis of *Beloved* in the light of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*: According to Césaire, forced labour, intimidation, pressure and rape [11] occur between a colonizer and a colonized. We can see that white men in *Beloved* rape Black African women. Sethe's mother is sexually assaulted several times while travelling from Africa to America and she throws away many children as well. She has a branded mark on her ribcage and she gets no opportunity to nurture her children as she has to do work for the whole day in the fields [6]. According to Sethe, her mother never fixed her hair and if the moon was bright, she worked by its light. Also, she sleeps in a different cabin. Another one-armed woman called Nan served as the wetnurse of Sethe and she drank Nan's milk after the white babies had got it. Significantly, her mother who speaks another language never got the chance to teach her children the African language. Thus, Césaire throws light on Millions of men who were torn from their gods, their land and their wisdom [11]. During the sea voyage Nan and her mother were taken up many times by the crew [6]. She threw the children of the Whites and only named her girl child Sethe, the name of a black man whom she loved. She is hanged with many other African women, which in turn tears apart the bonding between a mother and her daughter. Besides, Baby Suggs is also violated.

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Her eight children have six fathers. Her four daughters are sold before they had their “adult teeth” [6] and she cannot wave them goodbye even. She says “I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased” [6]. The “straw boss” [6] sexually exploits her only to sell the son that he has fathered. Likewise, the overseer of the ship in which her two daughters Nancy and Famous want to have sex with her as well. In her words, “slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings of their own but they must have a lot of children to please whoever owned them” [6]. Her owners, Mr. and Mrs. Garner call her Jenny Whitlow, her sale bill name. Therefore, we can see that her name, which is her identity, is lost in the process of her subjugation. She always lived in fear that a white man would knock her down in front of her children [6]. When she gets her freedom bought by her son Halle, she notices her heartbeat for the first time, “my heart's beating” [6] as she has never enjoyed independence before. This indicates her dead life during slavery. It can be observed that she cannot get a family life in her enslaved condition. Although she becomes an unchurched preacher at her old age, she loses faith in religion and God later on when Sethe is captured in her house by the schoolteacher and his associates. She thinks, that “she had done everything right and they came in her yard anyway” [6]. It is striking that she fails to get a proper burial because of a law by the Whites. So, her whole life and even death are fully controlled by the Whites whom she condemns as there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks.

Moreover, Sethe was a victim of arrant dehumanization in the hands of the Whites. Césaire is right when he writes Colonization thingification [11]. We can detect that Sethe becomes a thing, a non-being and one animal according to the White schoolteacher who along with his allies goes to capture Sethe out of the Fugitive Act of 1850. The nephews with mossy teeth of the schoolteacher not only beat her but also suck milk from her swollen breasts which Sethe describes as “And they took my milk” [6]. In a similar manner, Ella who helps the fugitives is also shared by “the lowest yet” [6] a White father and his son, and Stamp Paid's wife Vashti has to please the son of her husband's master. Ella also refuses to nurse the seeds of her rape. Morrison comments that language can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people and language [9]. Here, the schoolteacher compares Sethe with creatures like horse, hound and rabbit who has gone wild as a result of being mishandled, as in her case she is overbeaten. She is treated like a cow, a goat. The beating transmogrifies Sethe's back into a canvas upon which the image of American violence grafts itself [5]. In America, all slaves who tried to escape from slavery had to cross the Ohio River [12]. Her crossing water is a metaphor which means her freedom [12]. She only gets twenty-eight days of unslaved life and after her infanticide of Beloved, she is boycotted by the whole Black community. She decides to kill her four children but fails. As the newly born Black babies would automatically inherit their parents' status as slaves [13], Sethe cuts the throat of her third child and the eldest daughter Beloved with a saw so that her daughter does not live as a non-entity objectified as property like her. Infanticide only seems to be the pathway of freedom for her children from the schoolteacher and his allies. Shockingly, she prostitutes herself for a headstone for Beloved's grave when she gets out of jail. Although Paul D thinks that it is risky and dangerous for a slave woman to love her children too “thick” and Sethe has “two feet, not four”, we can detect that Sethe slaughters Beloved to save her from slavery. As a punishment of her murder, she has to live with eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life and no members eat foods prepared by Sethe during Baby Suggs's death ceremony.

In contrast to all these women, we can find Amy, a white indentured servant girl who is singing the song her mother has taught her. It is hinted in the novel that Mr. Buddy is her father [14]. She sees the spiritual significance in Sethe who is a child of God and one of God's Beloved [14]. Her description of Sethe's beaten back as a chokecherry tree connotes the Biblical Tree of Life in Revelations 22.2 which overshadows death [14]. Similarly, Lady Jones who has “yellow woolly hair” [6] can become educated because of her light skin. Being different than the Blacks, she feels that they scorn her just as she despises herself for not being completely Black.

Furthermore, the impact of slavery is much too harsh on the psyche of children. According to Cornell, the myth of the killing mother is retold and the slave reality is that a slave is allowed to bear the children but not to raise them [15]. For Sethe, the ghost also represents the inevitable haunting of the past and her own actions [16]. When Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, and no voice in their upbringing [17]. The thirsty ghost of Beloved with “three vertical scratches on her forehead” who was not even two years old when Sethe's whose mother love was a killer killed her returns to haunt Sethe. Howard and Buglar are chased off by her. Sethe is guilt-ridden as she cannot keep her “best thing” [6]. Eighteen-year-old Denver is lonely and rebuked in the abandoned 124 Bluestone house. In spite of her love for her mother, Denver is scared of her as Sethe has decapitated Beloved. She believes that she has no self without Beloved.

Imperialism is also harsh on African men. Césaire mentions that fear and an inferiority complex have been cunningly instilled in the hearts of millions of men [11]. In this novel, the three half-brothers Paul A, Paul F and Paul D live in miserable agony. Paul A is hanged and Paul F is sold. Paul D is sold to Brandywine whom he attempted to kill when he was chained with forty-six African men who are also called “Buffalo men” by the Whites. With “tobacco tin” [6] heart, which is the embodiment of his caged life, he used to sleep in a box in the prison camp of Alfred, Georgia for 86 days and though later he manages to escape with the other members of the chain gang, he says “how much is a nigger supposed to take” [6] as he is psychologically shattered. Paul D's appearance is an immediate threat to the ghost because he represents the possibility of Sethe's recovery from despair – her hope for movement, growth and change- in short, and a new life [18].

The Africans are liberated by the Cherokee Indians, a tribe of Native Americans who were dispossessed from most of their lands because of the White settlers in USA [9]. Sixo stops speaking in English because he feels that there is no future in it and when he does not die when he is set on fire, a gun is used to shoot him to stop his singing. Halle works on Saturdays and Sundays to pay

off his mother's freedom. Halle loses his mental balance when he sees the nephews of the schoolteacher raping Sethe in the loft. As per Paul D this horrifying incident "broke" [6] Halle and sitting by the churn he has butter all over his face.

That "The idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention" [11] is claimed by this Martinique writer. Stamp Paid asserts that White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin, was a jungle. Ironically, the Whites forget that the screaming baboon lived under their white skin. The "little man" schoolteacher who has "book learning" [6] chastises the nephew that Sethe has gone wild like a horse as she is overbeaten. Mareeswari [19] rightly unfolds that he is definitely an anti-Christ figure who signals a return to chaos. Surprisingly, he is researching a book on the African slaves. He beats Sixo who has stolen the shoat to show that "definitions belonged to the definers- not the defined" [6]. Although Mrs. Garner presents Sethe with a pair of crystal earrings in her marriage and cries like a baby when she gets to know that Sethe is raped, she refuses to stay with the black men in her house alone after the death of her husband. Mr. Garner's evangelicalism is evident when he prides himself that he has men not boys and he is liberal and distrustful of the African men as he points out "I wouldn't have no nigger men round my wife" [6]. Just like a master he considers his slaves as his own niggers. Baby Suggs correctly thinks that the Garners run a special kind of slavery treating the Africans like paid labor. Even though they give food and no one rapes African women in Sweet Home, Halle has to work hard to buy his mother's bondage from the Garners. The names- Paul A, Paul D and Paul F- further imply that Africans have no existence. Because of her broken hip, Baby Suggs costs less for the Garners on their farm at Kentucky called Sweet Home. Sethe tends her as she would have tended her own mother [6]. It is ironical that Sethe, fearing that Mr Bodwin will take away her children, attacks him with an icepack though he supports abolition of slavery and saves Sethe from being hanged. However, in their house Denver sees an ornament of a black boy's mouth full of money on whose pedestal it was written that "At Yo Service" [6]. This denotes that they think of themselves as the ruling Occidental race.

Relations of domination and submission and no human contact [11] are followed by the non-Blacks. As Morrison has stated:

In eighteen seventy-four even after the liberation of the Africans, eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burnt to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken [7].

It is significant that the names of African slaves were changed during slavery. For example, Jenny becomes the name of Baby Suggs. She keeps her name Baby Suggs because her husband used to call her by this name. Stamp Paid's previous name was Joshua which he changes to show that he is now enjoying his own salvation.

In *Discourse* Césaire holds in high regard the communal, democratic, cooperative, anti-capitalist, ante-capitalist, fraternal and courteous pre-colonial African societies and advises Africans to create a new society with the help of all their brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days [11]. Sethe's mother talks in African language and colonialism's miasma impedes her from teaching her language to Sethe. Paul D, Sixo and other men can also sing as they worked. This indicates that Africans had a rich culture. Community feeling is also apparent here as Ella and Stamp Paid rescue the fugitives and the former is disconcerted when a "working man" [6] like Paul D sleeps in the church cellar. Thirty women come to exorcise the spirit of Beloved and they save Sethe when Denver needs their help. Ella who hates Sethe by saying that "I ain't got no friends take a handsaw to their own children" [6] also comes to her rescue.

The novel ends with hope when Paul D states to Sethe "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" [6]. The novel begins with a promise that good will win out over evil, no matter how powerful evil is. It is a promise of acceptance for a people previously scorned and rejected [18] In fact, the epigraph is taken from Romans 9:25 in which Apostle Paul accepts the once despised and outcast Gentiles and so the passage proclaims not rejection but reconciliation and hope [20].

Conclusion: It can be discerned that slavery leads to torment in the lives of African slaves who were coerced to work in the 19th century USA. The Europeans chained, raped, killed, and snatched from them their linguistic craft, family and their country. Amidst such a demoralizing situation Sethe, a mother can kill her offspring. The haunting memories of slavery cause distress in their lives. Still, there is a hope that Africans who are free after the American Civil War can decolonize their minds and live in harmony together.

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