Demoralization and Dehumanization of African Race: A Study of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

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Abstract

The objective of the paper is to look at the ways, Afro-Americans had been dehumanized, demoralized and marginalized in the trade of slavery by means of which they questioned their identity, culture, genealogy and their selves. Slavery was the curse deliberately forced on them which had left unendurable scars on their psyches. Eventually, this had aroused serious traumatic effects on their psyches. Worse than this, its cultural history and customs had been demolished which had left Afro-American race to suffer inexorably. Moreover, the paper will analyze racism, sexism, and classicism to highlight, how the Afro-Americans had been degraded and forced to live cannibal lives. Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* deconstructed the problems of demoralization, dehumanization, marginalization, slavery, racism, sexism, classicism, uncanny, pathological mourning, ethnic cleansing and haunting to delineate the dehumanized and demoralized selves of Afro-American race. The author spoke the unspoken and unbearable truths of Afro-Americans who were victimized and had remained the worst sufferers in the history of the world. People of Afro-American race had been torn physically, emotionally and psychologically throughout the ages. The paper will study the anguish and psychological disorders of Afro-African race delineated by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*. The concept of dehumanization and demoralization from psychoanalytical perspective will be applied on the text.

**Key words:** Mourning, haunting, slavery, racism, ethnic cleansing, marginalization.

Introduction

Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* deconstructed and deciphered the problems of demoralization, dehumanization, marginalization, slavery, racism, sexism, classicism, pathological mourning, ethnic cleansing, neurosis and haunting to portray the dehumanized and demoralized selves of Afro-American race. The author articulated the unarticulated and unendurable truths of the Afro-American people who had been victimized and were worst languishers’ in the history of humanity.
Afro-Americans had been exploited and belittled on behalf of colour, race, class and sex. People of this race had been torn physically, emotionally and psychologically throughout the ages. Teresa Heffernan, Professor of English at Saint Mary’s University in her book, *Post-apocalyptic Culture* (2008), explained the Eurocentric experiences which entails, “a gradual decline in social, economic, and moral conditions, a major catastrophe, then a new beginning—an unreliable model when imposed upon the Black American experience” (72). Slavery haunted their lives so in this way, it had left unforgettable scars on their consciousness. These psychic scars had remained there for ages and ages and later transplanted from one generation to the next. These had been clutched to retain the worthless positions in the white dominated societies. Moreover, they had been isolated from their existence, imprisoned, deprived from educational, social, political and economic rights. The effects of lynchings could still be investigated in their traumatic psyches.

Toni Morrison states that “nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people” (Heffernan 3). It had not been conceivable for these Afro-Americans to had normal mourning because of psychological horrors of slavery. Afro-Americans had been dislodged from their culture, genealogy, tradition and language by the white masters who owned them so that they could not forward their stories and claim for their recognition and stability. Zadie Smith, an English novelist wrote in her novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* that “but more people died in Rwanda, but, yes, millions and millions” (7). Furthermore, Afro-American race lived a guttural life under the white apartheid race who under their draconian laws and policies molested their wives and children so a void developed in their selves and consciousness.

The agony of slavery, lynching’s, genocide, and sexuality portrayed in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* accentuate the lives of survivors and dead ones during and after the slavery. The novel *Beloved* directed a message to Afro-American race that the Africans had to tackle with slavery as a part of their past and fight with it. The message had been forwarded to white Afro-American masters that they had potential to heal their wounds, remove the scars and pain of slavery from their broken and fractured psyches. Toni Morrison verbalized that “their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them” (5). Hardly, the people of this race came out of this trauma of slavery inflicted to them by white masters from time to time. In the eyes of slave masters, slave women were not mothers at all and were candidly
instruments to improve their master’s economy. Moreover, their wives had been premeditated as breeders, worthless than animals and accounted on the basis of their child producing capacity. Rape for the slaveholders was not simply the fulfillment of their sexual urges; it was a mechanism of domination, hegemony, repression and subjugation of their male slaves to keep them sabotaged.

Robert Jay Lifton, an American psychiatrist made a statement about “designated victims” of Afro-American race who had been forced to “live off” economically, socially and psychologically and had been looked up as outcasts, ‘Others’ and malignant for the white dominated society (4). On the other side, these Afro-Americans in terms of their blackish nature and ethnic origin suffered from discrimination and exploitation. Moreover, Laura S. Brown, a clinical and forensic psychologist of Washington studied the psychic scars of the socially neglected Afro-Americans in an American clinical psychologist Maria P. P. Root’s concept of “insidious trauma” in “Decolonizing Trauma” and came out with the statement that “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (4). Being acknowledged as marginalized race, Afro-Americans were more prone to vulnerability, instability and had been disorganized. For them, there was no locus to claim about and thus felt isolated. Their self-skepticism gave birth to ‘double consciousness’ and identity crisis. Anxiety, depression, trauma and post-traumatic stress had remained part and parcel of the Afro-Americans lives. A research at Howard School of Psychiatry figured about 65% of people got affected by post-traumatic stress most of them belonged to Afro-American race. Sigmund Freud, an Australian neurologist and father of psychoanalysis defined anxiety as “a response to perceived danger or stress” (Irving 6). The unexpected death of a close relative, physical violation, execution with a weapon, sexual molestation, gang rape, etc. had remained a daily routine of their lives. The end product of these vicious and brutal tortures made Afro-Americans animalistic, wounded, ghastly, monstrous, horrible and schizophrenic. The wretched and inhuman conditions of the Afro-American race were the cause of imprisonment, poverty, homelessness, jobless and various other factors. Morrison conveyed her message through the character of Baby Suggs that, “[n]ot a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (5). No race in the world had been imprisoned, disregarded and executed more than the Afro-Americans alone in the world.
In addition to this, suicide was a way to elude from racism, sexual molestation, marginalization, inhumanity, atrocities and dehumanization from the white masters. It alleviated them to move from the clutches and cages of their masters. Females had been more subjugated as compared to males so they excelled in the suicide rate and faced abject cruelty such as Sethe, Baby Suggs suffered in the novel Beloved. Seth’s mother pronounced that Sethe “the one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names she threw them” (5). It depicts their pathetic plight under their slave masters.

Toni Morrison in Beloved raised the issues about the nameless and the lost Afro-Americans, Sethe was made conscious by Nan about her mother that, “which would never come back,” of the other babies she bore in the Middle Passage, the product of rapes by the crew, whom she threw away “without names” (Beloved 3). It had not been predicted the overall deaths in the ‘Middle Passage’. Morrison used the words “Sixty Million and more” (5). It indicates the countless lives lost in the Afro-American trade of slavery. Historians has no appropriate records and documents about these lost Afro-Americans, hence, it reflects these were “disremembered and unaccounted” (5). Toni Morrison wrote this novel Beloved a document to this “untranslatable” loss (3). Beloved the daughter of Sethe is a testimony of millions who had been disconnected and murdered from their culture, language, family, and tradition. Morrison wrote that, “Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name” (5). This shows the way Afro-Americans have been ridiculed and tortured under slavery. Sethe symbolizes all the Africans who are disremembered and unaccounted in the history.

In Beloved, it is expounded by Toni Morrison that white masters treated the Afro-American race as uncivilized, uncultured, and beasts. Schoolteacher understood from the brutal act of Sethe that, “[a]ll testimony to the results of a little so called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred” (5). The people had been deliberately demonized and demoralized by falsified narratives. Toni Morrison, a Christ like figure of the Afro-Americans who gave voice to this voiceless race. She brought forward their message to the world at large. This she mentioned at the end of the novel Beloved, though Beloved,
the Daughter of Sethe had gone her footprints remained. These were deeply drenched in the psyches of Afro-Americans.

The ending demonstrated that the Afro-Americans could never left slavery altogether because slavery was part of their past lives. It had formed troublesome distress in their hearts and psyches so these Afro-Americans got trapped in their past and found almost impossible to move out of this tormenting pain that finally led them to death. Their ‘libido’ energy could not detach from these heinous acts imposed on them in the past. Due to the fear of their memories, these Afro-Americans were not able to confront them. They had not only the phobia of personal memories but also the horror of racial memories. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist enunciated that these memories of ancient fears appeared to them in various folktales and cultures. These were stored in their ‘Collective Unconscious’. From time to time, they were haunted by them and in this regard, it was hardly feasible for them to had normal mourning for the disappeared and massacred ones.

In Beloved, Toni Morrison did not write only about masters raping Sethe. She also described Sethe’s humiliation and sorrow in a scene when two of her master’s nephews sucked the milk from Sethe’s breasts. It was this intolerable pain in the mind of Sethe that always obsessed her. Sigmund Freud, a renowned psychologist expressed that ‘libido’ need to be detached from the lost object, but Sethe had not been able to detach her psychical energy from the lost object her daughter, as a result she became victim of pathological mourning which became a serious psychic disorder for her. Sethe experienced ruthless torture at Sweet Home and the savage treatment she received by the hands of Schoolteacher’s nephews, forced her to kill her own daughter with a spade.

Moreover, Sethe lost her mother at a very young age. Thousands of Afro-African children could never saw who gave them birth because in their early childhood they had been separated from their mothers. Sethe herself acknowledged that after “her husband had disappeared; that after her milk had been stolen, her back pulped, her children orphaned, she was not to have an easeful death. No” (Beloved 5). Toni Morrison through Sethe’s memories of her mother illustrated that under slavery mothers were struggling for their children and their self-identity. Sethe’s motherly loss had created a void inside her. She did not want to pass it on to her children. She preferred to keep them away from this unimaginable master slave relationship. She killed her two years old daughter rather to
be racked like her in the trade of slavery. Julia Kristeva’s, a female psychoanalyst, linguist and philosopher recounted that women were not as ‘culturally prone’ but in fact ‘constitutionally’ brought up to become failed mourners, capitulated to depression. By execution, Sethe claimed that her child belonged to her. Although she knew that a female slave did not have any legal rights over her children. Sethe was molested, fractured, dehumanized and demoralized by white masters. Sethe says “After they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses” (5). Most of the slave women during slavery suffocated their babies rather granted them to become the victim of slavery such deliberate attempts did not provide solace to an individual. This was the case of Sethe who dwelled in the thoughts of her past life and lost her ease, in this juncture and conditions one required sympathy, consolation, condolence, and compassion of others but rarely did she achieve it from any one. Ramazani, an American professor of University of Virginia and expert in mourning described the melancholic nature of mourning that “a work of grieving less idealistic and more ambivalent, enraged, and aggressive” (1). In this case, Sethe could not relieved herself from the horrible episodes happened with her. She turned into a living ghost and became more ambivalent, ferocious, despising and finally unable to mourn.

In a similar vein, the same loss happened to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. Both of them lost their children and then lost their interest in living. Baby Suggs made a statement that “not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negroes grief” (Beloved 5). There impaired psyches could not link with the outside world. In slavery trade, Baby Suggs lost her son Halle who disappeared and never reappeared back to her. She strayed her grandson’s as they absconded away from the house. They got frightened by the ghost of their dead baby sister Beloved. She rested on her bed waiting for her death to come. For Baby Suggs, all her eight children had been seized from her by white masters in the trade of slavery. Death even could not soothe her soul such was the intensity of pain.

**Conclusion**

Afro-American race is deeply wounded by the tortures of slavery, racism, brutality, barbarity, demeaning and defaming. No matter how many generations had departed, the pain still lied in their hearts and psyches. This bore the brunt of severe mental problems such as depression, repression,
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hysteria, nervous disorders, mourning problem, anxiety, trauma and schizophrenia in African-American race. Their culture was mocked, falsified, denounced and considered as worthless. This turned their lives fragile, miserable and pathetic. Due to heinous torments, they raised questions against their identities, roots, background and culture. Their eyes were watching God, as all their hopes had been shattered by the white masters.

Works Cited


