
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dramatizing the Drama of Black Life: A Life of Subjection and Objectification in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

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| ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comparative literary analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*. Using a Marxist critical framework, it argues that the institution of slavery, driven by economic motives, systematically dehumanized Black individuals through subjection and objectification. The analysis explores how this process caused profound and lasting physical, social, and psychological trauma, which the novels dramatize through themes of family dislocation, cultural uprooting, and internalized oppression.

Cet article propose une analyse littéraire comparative de *Beloved* de Toni Morrison et de *Middle Passage* de Charles Johnson. S'appuyant sur un cadre critique marxiste, il soutient que l'institution de l'esclavage, motivée par des raisons économiques, a systématiquement déshumanisé les Noirs par la soumission et l'objectification. L'étude explore comment ce processus a provoqué des traumatismes physiques, sociaux et psychologiques profonds et persistants, que les romans dramatisent à travers les thèmes de la dislocation familiale, du déracinement culturel et de l'oppression intériorisée.

| KEYWORDS

To dramatize, subjection, objectification, legacy

Dramatiser, assujettissement, objectification, héritage

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1. Introduction

Historical evidences show that black people face a number of predicaments since their landing in America. One of the most important events in the history of African-americans is the experience of slavery. This historical event can be succinctly defined as an oppressive system conducted by people whose burning passion is to make a fortune and impose their hegemonic order. Since their landing in America in the 1600s, blacks have been dehumanized by the debilitating effects of slavery. During slavery, blacks were alienated, reduced to objects and merchandise. To put it bluntly, blacks were commodified.

The present article, considering the novels of Morrison and Johnson as powerful books that portray the drama of black life, delves into them, examining relevant themes such as subjugation, objectification, and the legacy of slavery. Both novels offer a painstaking analysis of Black experience shedding light on the brutalities of slavery and its ongoing impact on individuals and communities' identity. Leaning on a Marxist framework, this article explores the themes of subjugation and objectification, putting forward the dehumanizing effects of slavery where enslaved individuals are treated as objects or cattle rather than human beings. In the novels, the theme of subjugation is

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treated under the headings of physical violence, emotional manipulation, cultural erasure, separation, and loss. And, the theme of objectification is treated under the following headings: the slave trade, the gaze of the oppressor, and the erasure of black humanity.

Lois Tyson writes: "For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on. Thus, economics is the base on which the superstructure of social/political/ideological realities is built" (2015, p. 51). As aforementioned, slavery was institutionalized by people whose burning passion is to make a fortune and impose their hegemonic order. To put it bluntly, the rationale behind the institution of slavery was first and foremost economical. So, Marxism is the appropriate literary theory that can help dissect the socioeconomic reasons that led to the dehumanization of the black community through the use of concepts such as alienation, rugged individualism, and commodification.

In examining the mishandling of African-american during slavery from the standpoint of Morrison and Johnson or their dramatization of this American historical past, our concern in the present investigation is guided by the following interrogations: how do Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson's novels portray the drama of Black life? Do the novels try to illustrate the ways in which Black individuals resisted, survived in face of the oppressor? How do they display the lasting impact of slavery on the black individuals present?

Aiming at showing how the alienation and merchandizing of the Black character brought about lasting trauma and entangled identity, the study leans upon a Marxist framework to simultaneously analyze the conditions in which the black man has been subjugated and objectified. It closes with the exploration of how the aforementioned mishandling continue to shape the present of black individuals and communities.

2. Fragmentation of Social Structures and Cultural Uprooting

2.1 The Dislocation of Black Families during and after Slavery

The trouble family dislocation caused to the black community in America is verbalized by Morrison's female character as the "nastiness of life." In *Beloved*, *Middle Passage* and, family separation is a recurrent issue. Aiming at preventing any potential slave rebellion, the best tactic slave holders adopt is the disorganization of black family. The issue of family dislocation is treated under different key aspects.

The theme of family dislocation is first and foremost perceivable through the separation between the living and the dead. The separation of the slaves from their ancestors turns them into orphans and makes them angry. The breaking with the ancestors is a symptom of loss. And this loss leads the black community to a severe identity crisis. As evidence, in *Beloved* Sethe's mother and other slaves have been taken away from their families in Africa and sold to the slavers. In *Middle Passage* the Allmuseri have also suffered from the separation from the homeland. They have been captured by Ahman-de-Belah and sold to Captain Falcon who transported them far from the ancestors' land. Elizabeth Kella appropriately pinpoints the role ancestors play in an individual's self-definition. She declares that: "If we don't keep in touch with the ancestor ... we are, in fact, lost... When you kill the ancestors, you kill yourself" (2000: 142).

Kella emphasizes the importance living communities must attach to their ancestors. Correspondingly, one characteristic of the black Africans is their strong attachment to their homeland. This firm attachment is essentially due to the fact that they attach great importance to their ancestors who are buried in this land. With their ancestor they constitute a big and consolidated family. The strong attachment of blacks to their dead is perceivable through the libations they perform before starting ceremonies. So, once these links are broken the members of the family are plunged into an uncomfortable situation. With respect to what has just been said, the separation between the living and the dead constitutes a spiritual disorganization of black families. Actually, this spiritual separation is just the first step of a prolonged and wretched situation.

On top of the separation of the living and the dead, the separation between the living is also another main aspect of family dislocation. It is characterized by isolation and loneliness of family members. Because of slavery almost all black characters in *Beloved* and *Middle Passage* suffer from the absence of at least one family member. Isolation is

visible through the decaying of parenthood and brotherhood. With this end in view, Johnson's novel provides us with a pertinent case of parenthood degradation. The protagonist Rutherford and his brother Jackson lost their mother when they were still very young. Moreover, their father, Rely Calhoun, ran away, leaving them in the hands of a white master, Reverend Chandler. These characters did not benefit from parental love.

Similarly, in Morrison's *Beloved*, the collapse of family relationships proves to be more poignant. As an illustration, Sethe the female protagonist is a character who suffers from the weakening of parenthood. First of all, she did not know her father. She never heard about him. Next, she saw her mother only a couple of times. Her mother has been hanged after an unsuccessful attempt of escaping. Again, Sethe lost her husband Halle and the worst thing about that is she did not know whether he is alive or dead. Her boys; Buglar and Howard left her and Denver when the situation went awry at 124 Bluestone Road. Her daughter Denver also suffers from the absence of her father and brothers.

Moreover, an equally important case of family dislocation to be noted is the appalling situation of Baby Suggs. She had eight children with six fathers. But unfortunately, she lost all of them. She does not have the opportunity to pamper her offspring. She is deprived of a fundamental characteristic of women that is to be a mother. Addressing Sethe, Baby Suggs laments:

Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil" (...) My first born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Eight children and that's all I remember. (Morrison 6)

These very first forms of family dislocation that consists in the separation of living and dead, parents and children cause a disruption of the characters self-definition. In fact, the notions of home, parents are essential components of an individual's self-definition process. Once they are snatched away from the ancestors' land, the spatial component that is an essential part of their identification is removed. In the case of the present study, originally called Africans, the black community is renamed African-Americans people because of their displacement.

Significantly, family dislocation constrains a number of characters to construct their identities taking into account the absence of their parents, namely the father. Parenthood has huge impact on a person's identity, emotions, behavior and consequently their social integration. The absence of parents thus engenders inconsistencies in the individual's life. The father is particularly the person who guarantees family stability. Accordingly, it is possible to argue that absence of home and parents constitute holes in a person's identity. The gaps in an individual's self-identification keep this latter in isolation and cause them overwhelming sadness. Morrison correctly describes the absence of home and family members as total disconcertment of the individual. She writes: "For the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self-made its home" (165).

Isolation culminates into loneliness. The plight of all the Blacks who have been snatched away from their families is expressed through the situation of Denver. The loneliness of Denver is expressed in these words; "Hot, shy, now Denver lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother – serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch railing" (Morrison 14-15). Denver herself addressing her mother she complains bitterly:

"I can't no more. I can't no more."
"Can't what? What can't you?"
"I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by."

Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (17).

Loneliness is direct corollary of the disintegration of social structures materialized through isolation. Being a social disconnection and isolation physically and spiritually, loneliness brings about sorrows and feeling of low self-esteem in human beings. High loneliness eventually leads to severe depression since one intrinsic characteristic of human being is togetherness. Any human being self-development depends in part on rubbing shoulders with his likes. Otherwise, the individual becomes an island and consequently annoyance and frustration appear as their only companions. The description of Denver appropriately lines up with this negative aspect of loneliness. According to the narrative voice, "...loneliness wore her [Denver] out. *Wore her out* [italics in original]" (Morrison, 35). So, Denver is just an example that epitomizes the situation of a great deal of African-Americans who suffered in such conditions. This is a sign of unfavorable social atmosphere to the self-development of black people in America. In other words, the social living conditions of blacks do not allow them to develop.

It is also worth noting that family dislocation causes the development of devil spirits in the minds of the victims. On that account, we have on the one hand the feelings of hatred that pervade the minds of some victims. For instant, Sethe and Calhoun respectively the protagonist of Morrison and Johnson's works illustrate this point clearly when they problematize authenticity and benefits of parenthood. Before his re-configuration, Calhoun hated his father for having deserted his family. Calhoun asserts: "All my life I'd hated him because he had cut and run like hundreds of field hands before him" (Johnson 169). He considers his father as a coward man. By the same token Sethe finds it unimaginable, that her mother tries to run away without her. On the other hand, family dislocation turns parents into murderers. In fact, fearing the fact of being separated from their offspring without knowing where and how they will live, leads some women to murder their babies. Evidence in *Beloved* is at page 74 and at page 66 in *Middle Passage*.

However, it is important to indicate that parents do not run away leaving their children because they do not care about them. By the same token, mothers do not throw babies in water because they hate them. On the contrary, they do have thick love for their offspring. It is rather the living death they are in that leads them to behave so. Parents flee without their children because they want to find better living conditions. As for mothers who throw their babies, they just want to spare the babies from the horrors of slavery. For this reason, bitter separation appears as the way to salvation.

The importance of family and social life is underscored by Aristotle. In his masterpiece *Politics*, the legendary Greek philosopher Aristotle said, "Man is by nature a social animal." With respect to this assertion of Aristotle, one can utter that the impulse towards social life is innate in any human being. The society is itself composed of micro units called families. Logically, if society is indispensable for the individual, it unquestionably means that the disaggregation of families disturbs the individual too much.

The present analysis proves that family disintegration is evident in the works of Morrison, Johnson and Haley. Therefore, it is certain that the black characters who have been victims of this misdeed have been thrown in an utter cul-de-sac. They ignore the African community they are exactly from and they are disoriented in America. The bitter separation of African family members is adequately summarized in *Middle Passage*. Calhoun reports that the disorganization of the families consists in separating "husbands from wives, children from their parents, the infirm from the healthy, each parting like an amputation or flaying of skin, for as a clan-state they were as close-knit as cells in the body" (Johnson 58). To put it bluntly, before the slavers' burst into Africa, families, tribes, clans were tightly held together by relationships such as brotherhood, parenthood, solidarity hence the consolidation of culture.

The point with family dislocation in this study is that it leads the victim into an identity crisis. As said above the family is the first entity where the individual's socialization starts. That is exactly why the phenomenon of family dislocation has a number of corollaries, namely isolation and loneliness that in turn lead to loss of culture.

In *Middle Passage* Calhoun expresses his identity crisis through the absence of his parents. He explains that his mother died from overwork in the fields of Illinois when he was three (Johnson 28). He adds; "... our mother, Ruby, died, *thus* [italics mine] leaving me in the care of a brother like a negative of myself" (112). And, talking about his father he tells Cringle: "I don't even know who my father *is*. Mine was never there to expect anything of me, or to make me expect much from myself. I have no family traditions to maintain. In a way, I have no past, Peter. At least that's how I've often felt. When I looked behind me, for my father, there is only emptiness..." (160). Calhoun goes through an identity crisis due to parents' absence. A mother relatively known and a father never seen made of Calhoun a stray. Saying that 'he is left in the care of a brother' implies that he is deprived of mother. Yet, mother education is a primordial step in culture acquisition. Talking about his father, the word 'emptiness' he uses equates the absence of family tradition he aforementioned. In brief, absence of parents which is a corollary of family dislocation rhymes with identity crisis. No parents, no family traditions to pass on, and consequently no culture to talk about. To exist as human being but without is a tangible sign of objectification and animalization.

Family dislocation is a potent tactic used by the oppressors to control the slaves. It is an impediment that worsens the social situation of blacks by preventing their upward mobility. Performed through isolation, this tactic also placed many blacks in an uncomfortable armchair of cultural identity. This position of cultural 'in-betweenness,' to borrow a term from Fred Moten (*Blackness and Nothingness* 745) is the subject matter of the next section.

3. Acculturation of the Black Community

Another striking misdeed of slavery that entangled blacks' identity matters more is acculturation. The dislocation of African families is also implemented through cultural alienation. In this work, cultural alienation is referred to as acculturation. According to the *Harrap's 21st Century Dictionary* the term acculturation designates the process whereby one group of people becomes more like another group of people in behavior, customs, etc., usually because of living near them for a long time. Although this may be true, it is all the more important to insist that the acculturation of African-Americans is not a process due to a sheer cohabitation nor a matter of time. It has rather been a forced process. It takes place through a number of tactics and actions imposed upon the slaves by the masters. This section therefore explores the acculturation of African-Americans through the works of Morrison, Johnson in the light of the point of view of some researchers who skillfully operationalized the concept "acculturation." The analysis is thus propped by what Bogardus called "imposed acculturation," and termed as "assimilation" by Teske and Nelson (1974: pp. 351-367).

The acculturation of the African-American starts with the process of unaming, renaming and naming. This first step consists in stripping blacks of their original names. The slaves are then given nicknames or just renamed after their white masters. Some characters in Morrison's *Beloved* are victims of this form of acculturation. By way of illustration, Baby Suggs and her husband are notable examples. Stripped of their African names they are renamed after their master. Thus, Baby Suggs is renamed Jenny Whitlow. The following conversation with her master is tangible proof of her bewilderment:

"Mr. Garner" she said, "why you all call me Jenny?"
"Cause that what's on your sales ticket, gal. Ain't that your name? What you call yourself?"

"Nothing" (...) "I don't call myself nothing." (Morrison 167).

Through this conversation, Baby Suggs laments her confusion. Clearly, she does not know which family she belongs to and consequently where she is from. She can only identify herself by her skin color. The word 'nothing' she uses to identify herself is concrete sign of ignorance and total loss.

In the same way, the arrogance and pride of Mr. Garner led him to name almost all his male slaves 'Paul.' So, at Sweet Home the names of the male slaves were Paul A Garner, Paul D Garner and Paul F Garner. The Pauls are a

brand name, when being sold the Pauls will be recognized as a type of product from a specific producer; Mr. Garner. In the same fashion as the brand on Sethe's mother, these persons lose their original identity as they are now recognized like commodities or cows on which is the label of an operator. From a Marxist critic standpoint, this is exactly an act of human beings' commodification.

These findings corroborate the ideas of Morrison and Allan Kulikoff who long reflect upon the topic. In an interview with Thomas Le Clair, Morrison highlights this form of cultural uprooting:

If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar. The best thing you can do is take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice. (LeClair, 1994:126)

Similarly, historian Allan Kulikoff reflects upon this issue in his historical book entitled *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800*. He writes: "Not only were Africans forced to work for harsh masters in a strange land but masters usually stripped them of their names, their last personal possession. [...] Masters in the Chesapeake, without ceremony, forced Africans to adopt English names and required that they be used in daily exchanges between whites and blacks". (325)

In her assertion, Morrison reiterates the importance of the connection between the living and the dead. The process of unaming, renaming and naming performed by the slave masters disconnects not only the African living and the dead, but it also disorients the living. Actually, the name constitutes an essential component of cultural characteristics. It is a label that allows the members of a family or community to recognize each other and to be recognized by others. So, once an individual's original name is gone, he/she becomes as an intruder in the society, since they have lost essential part of their identity. As was pointed out at the beginning of this section, the process of acculturation takes place through different tactics. So, having examined how the method of naming is used to disorganize black families, the analysis now move on to discuss another core element of culture that is the loss mother tongue.

The loss of mother tongue constitutes another major ramification of acculturation. In fact, the slaves were deported from different parts of Africa and from different ethnic groups. So, once in America, to be able to communicate with each other they had a unique tool of communication; the language of the master. Consequently, they put their original languages aside and then try to cope with the new circumstances. Eventually, they adopt the language of the master that is imposed on them. And, that is the completion of the process of uprooting.

Evidence of this loss of mother tongue is stated in *Beloved* in these terms, "What Nan told her she [Sethe] had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back" (Morrison 74). This statement clearly shows the slaves' loss of their mother tongue forevermore. Yet, language is a cornerstone of culture since it is what we think in, what we communicate with, and through what we preserve and pass on our customs. Thus, to think and communicate in somebody else's language means indubitably to embrace the culture of this latter. So, the loss of mother tongue puts the lid on the process of acculturation. Linda Hutcheon accurately asserts: "Language paradoxically both expresses and oppresses, educates and manipulates" (2004: 199).

To recapitulate, it is possible to say that the contact between persons of different cultures is as old as the world. For people have been constantly travelling around the world for various and specific reasons. However, it is noteworthy to underline that the displacement of Africans from their homeland to America during slavery has been a tragic nightmare. As I have tried to show above, their encounter with the white community in America entailed a steep cultural clash. Unfortunately, they are the bad losers of this nasty culture shock, hence their total acculturation.

In general, the Middle Passage refers to the black slaves trafficking during the 19th century. However, in Johnson's *Middle Passage*, this term allegorically designates the hanging of Calhoun between two cultures. The culture of the crew whose language he speaks and the one of the Allmuseri whom he resembles by the skin color. He fails to identify himself. Also, the society he lives in, when the different communities define themselves, they keep him at arm's length. To remind, the crewmen call him negro and the Allmuseri consider him as a 'cooked' (Johnson 153) among raw materials. As a matter of fact, Calhoun is placed in an uncomfortable armchair of self-definition.

Epitomizing the whole African-American community, Calhoun lives in an in-between position; torn between two cultures, the Western one symbolized by Falcon and the crew, and the African culture portrayed through the Allmuseri. Actually, the form of acculturation that the African-Americans have been victims of, falls in the lines of a sibling concept; assimilation. From Teske and Nelson's point of view, the cultural uprooting of blacks in America can be better described with this concept. Since they consider assimilation as unidirectional in its influence. In a similar fashion, Bogardus proposes an emphatic variant. Among the three forms of acculturation, he posited; 'blind acculturation,' 'democratic acculturation,' and 'imposed acculturation,' the last one i.e., imposed acculturation emphatically describes Black Americans' process of acculturation.

Calhoun accurately portrays the abasement of Blacks through the description of the Allmuseri. Calhoun explains: "Ngonyama and maybe all the Africans, I realized, were not wholly Allmuseri anymore. We had changed them. . . Falcon's tight-packing had contorted their flesh during these past few weeks, but into what sort of men I could not imagine. No longer Africans, yet not Americans either. Then what? And of what were they now capable?" (124-125). This description of the Allmuseri by Calhoun translates the extent to which African-Americans are transformed by slavery. They are deeply and negatively influenced and consequently placed in a veritable cul-de-sac. They are now capable of doing what is not part of their natural culture. The wound is so profound that it will remain an indelible scar on this community as Calhoun subsequently remarked. He observes:

. . . whether we liked it or not, he [Falcon] had changed a people simultaneously for the better and worse, made himself the silent prayer in all their projects to come. A cruel kind of connectedness. In a sense we all were ringed to the skipper in cruel wedlock. Centuries would pass whilst the Allmuseri lived through the consequences of what he had set in motion; he would be with them, I suspected, for eons, like an ex-lover, a despised husband, a rapist who, though destroyed by a mob, still comes to you nightly in your dreams: a creature hated yet nevertheless at the heart of all they thought or did (Johnson 143-144)

Through this assertion of Calhoun, one can, on the one hand infer that slavery remains a crux event in the life of African-Americans. They cannot define themselves without it. Basically, slavery touched everybody; Black and White, slave and master, oppressed and oppressor. However, the black man, being the oppressed is the one who picks the pieces. This is what Nathan Irvin Huggins rightly expresses when he writes:

All who were to be American, including European, African, and Asian people yet to enter the vortex, would be touched by the fact of slavery, even generations after slavery's end. But it would be the Afro-American who would know this truth most of all – North or South, slave or free – for generations into our own time. (The World and the Jug 85)

Slavery, will haunt the Afro-Americans forever. And, this is exactly one of the main reasons why writing about slavery even in this 21st century should not be seen as a retrogradation. In America, the black slaves endure a number of predicaments ranging from social, communal to individual concerns and misery. Disintegration of social relationship entailed acculturation and simultaneously the body and psychic space of the slaves are not spared. The following sections examine the physical ill treatments and their effects on the black slaves' ego.

4. Physical and Psychic Mutilation of the Black Being

4.1 Exploring Physical Violence on Blacks and Bad Living Condition

In *Middle Passage*, the African villages are raided by kidnappers. The valid African captives are then chained and forced to march to the coast under the brutality of the capturer all along the way. Once at the coast, the place of commodification, the Africans are subjected to the worst humiliation of their life. Because, they face impudent treatment. Calhoun explains: "First, Ahman-de-Bellah will have his people shave off their body hair. That's the first humiliation, makin'em smooth as babies from the womb, like mebbe they was born yesterday" (Johnson 58-59). What a humiliation, parents are turned as naked as the day they were born before their children. After this terrible humiliation, the black slaves are dissolve into things, objects and merchandised. Commodification is then the next step of humiliation and dehumanization. In fact, the prices of the captured Africans are discussed as real goods. Yet, forced exhibitionism and commodification are violations of the moral code for Africans. Exploring the physical violence inflicted to blacks, this section emphasizes practices such as torture, branding, gelding, raping and even summary execution.

The suffering of the slaves continues on the slave ships. The first form of mistreatment they face is the packing conditions. Once aboard the ship, the slaves are packed in filthy conditions making them terribly ill at ease. Calhoun describes the hideous conditions of slaves aboard the *Republic* as follows: "Once the Allmuseri saw the great ship and the squalid pit that would house them sardined belly-to-buttocks in the orlop, with its dead air and razor-teethed bilge rats, each slave forced to lie spoon-fashion on his left side to relieve the pressure against his heart—after seeing *this*, the Africans panicked" (Johnson 65). This inhuman treatment leads the slaves to look for ways of salvation. The appropriate way to salvation chosen is very often escaping. But, unsuccessful attempt of escaping entails severe punishment.

Above the bad conditions slaves live in, they are seriously scourged by the slavers in case of disobedience. Disobedience includes attempt of escaping. During the middle passage some slaves try to jump into the sea for salvation. In case of failure, the consequences are really bitter. Evidence is that the two slaves who unsuccessfully tried to jump overboard were violently scourged by Falcon. Calhoun reveals; "He beat them until blood came" (Johnson 66). Actually, their escape constitutes a loss of profit and a sign of incompetence of the slaver. Similarly, in *Beloved* Sethe has been beaten by Schoolteacher so badly that she got a tree on her back. Whipping left indelible scars on Sethe's back.

Other forms of physical violence some blacks suffer from are the horrible sexual practices on them. These forms of victimization even fall in the lines of violation of moral code regarding ethics. Sexual victimization can best be treated under two headings each pertaining to a genre. In fact, men and women undergo sexual violence in different ways. Women often lost their dignity by being raped and male lost their masculinity by being gelded.

In the context of slavery, sexual harassment is not an uncommon thing for African American. They are sexually persecuted not only during the middle passage but also in the plantations. As exclusive properties, the slaves can be used at any end by the master who is bestowed all rights including sexual satisfying. The evidences of sexual harassment are clearly depicted in the corpuses understudy. First, Morrison's female characters Baby Suggs and Sethe have several times been victims of sexual violence. Winter appropriately expresses the raping of black women in the following words: "Sexual violence was so thoroughly embedded in the system of slavery that it must be viewed not as incidental but as a constituent element of the trade" (*The Blind African Slave*, 13). Winter's assertion clearly shows that the raping of black women in the context of slavery can be identified as 'institutionalized sexual harassment.' Consequently, beyond the hard labor in the plantations the black women are also used as automatic teller machine wherein the white master can insert his bank card or allow somebody else to do so. Anyhow, whatever comes out of the "machine" profits to the master. Since, the black women are considered as "property that reproduced itself without cost" (Morrison 269). Hilary Beckles describes this systemic practice of rape with more details. In her 1999 book, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*, she writes:

Unrestricted sexual access to the slave women as a 'right' of mastery, and the refusal to exercise it on their part was considered strange if not irresponsible. Ideologically, slave owners understood well that they were entitled to commodify fully all the capabilities of slaves, as part of the search for maximum economic and social returns on their investment. Properly understood, this meant, among other things, the slave owners' right to extract a wide range of non-pecuniary socio-sexual benefits from slaves as a legitimate stream of returns on capital, and an important part of the meaning of colonial mastery (22).

Women also suffer from another form of sexual abuse that I describe as coerced sexual acts. This form of sexual abuse is enacted peacefully by the abuser with begrudging agreement of the victim. It is performed with a desire as well as a nondesire of the abused person. Tangible examples of women who go through this kind arranged sexual abuse are Morrison's female characters Baby Suggs and Sethe. The narrative voice reveals:

So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. *To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her--only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did.* (Italics mine 28)

As for Sethe, she confesses to *Beloved* that: "...when Denver was ready for solid food and they let me out for good, I went and got you a gravestone, but I didn't have money enough for the carving so *I exchanged* (bartered, you might say) what I did have and *I'm sorry* to this day..." (Italics mine 216-217). The very first horrification visible in these passages is the characters unwilling sexual intercourse. However, the texts show that the victims are not physically forced. They rather feel psychologically and morally obliged to do so. They are trapped in a kind of deal where they have to exchange or to barter as Sethe rightly terms it.

Here, to yield to the oppressor's sexual desire peacefully seems necessary for the victims. Accepting to have sex with the oppressor appears as the only possibility to reach one's goal. Through this begrudging moderate sexual practice, Baby Suggs gets the possibility to keep his child Halle and Sethe gets the gravestone of *Beloved* carved.

As far as men are concerned, they face the worst form of humiliation that is gelding. Gelding signifies degradation and dispossession of maleness. The case of Ghofan in *Middle Passage* is a distinct case to illustrate black men emasculation. Calhoun, talking about Ghofan declares: "Ghofan, a black who had been gelded, and then suffer the torture of brand. . ." (Johnson, 104). Actually, gelding destroys the individual's identity. Because, a gelded man is no longer a man properly speaking in the sense that he is no longer able to assume his role as householder. In addition, his present and future life is made meaningless. For he is henceforth unable to perpetuate his race. Henceforward, the white master uses the black women as incubator or brood hen to intensify their workforce in the plantations. To put it bluntly, it is the highest degree of humiliation and complete subjugation.

After exploring forms of physical violence such as whipping and sexual persecution, the trail of arguments now leads to branding. Branding is another form of victimization under which blacks suffer a lot. Branding is performed with an instrument called branding iron. Branding is a practice that involves a company giving a group of their products the same brand name and a branding iron is defined as a piece of metal that is heated and used for burning marks on cattle and sheep, to show who they belong to. A thorough analysis of these definition shows that branding is normally a practice that should be applied on goods or animals.

Appallingly, in the context of slavery, slaves are sometimes branded confirming thus the commodification and bestialization of black slaves. *Beloved* and *Middle Passage* acquaint us with glaring cases of branding. Calhoun describes: "Ghofan, a black who had been gelded, and then suffered from the torture of brand, pulled his shirt

down to show them how Falcon had burned the initials ZS not once but three times until the impression was as clear as stigmata, or the markings on cattle" (Johnson 134). He proceeds saying: "He [Falcon] was the Devil. Who else could twist the body so terribly? Who else could enslave gods and men alike? All like livestock, bore the initials of the *Republic's* financiers burned into their right buttock by a twisted wire – ZS, PZ, EG . . ." (95) In the same fashion as these slaves in Johnson's work, Sethe's mother is a victim of branding. Sethe describes and reports the words of her mother in this passage: "Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark'" (Morrison 72).

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that black slaves effectively suffered from branding. This practice denotes the cruelty of slavery that not only inflicted them corporal pains but dehumanized them by associating them with commodities and cattle. The corporal denaturation through branding that objectifies the slave is a case in point of identity disruption. Actually, a human who cannot be recognized by his/her culture or natural characteristics but, by a sign that has nothing to do with his/her original culture goes certainly astray.

Another glaring predicament that can be counted as part of black slaves' body degradation is their living conditions. The living conditions on focus here are slaves housing and clothing. The well-being and happiness of an individual depends mainly on the health and the goods he/she possesses. Once these conditions are lacking, the individual's life becomes wretchedness. In *Beloved* the housing conditions of blacks are described as follows; "Since when a blackman come to town have to live in a cellar like a dog?" (219) Wretchedness is perceivable when we analyze carefully the description. First, the slaves live in isolation from the master house, out of town. Second, when they have the opportunity to enter the town they have to live as dogs. And very often it is women who are allowed to live in the same house with the white master. Unfortunately, this favor like situation bestowed to slave women is backed up by lurking thoughts. As the woman who is considered as a house maid is supposed to satisfy the master multi-dimensionally. Because, not only has she has to take care of the master, but also, she has to satisfy his libido if need be. The predicament of women in that situation is highlighted by Sethe. She explains to Denver that; "Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind. Something like that had happened to Ella except it was two men---a father and son--- and Ella remembered every bit of it. For more than a year, they kept her locked in a room for themselves." (Morrison 140) Slaves are forced to the peripheral of the compound or the city. They live very often in huts or barracons.

Concerning their clothing it is a rudimentary one. Not only they are made of cheap junk but they are also coarse clothes. More shocking is that even these devaluing clothes were not accessible to all slaves. Only the luckier have access to these ridiculous clothes. The description Sethe makes of her own clothes denotes slaves' miserable clothing conditions. She reveals:

Well, I made up my mind to have at the least a dress that wasn't the *sacking* I worked in. So I took to stealing fabric, and wound up with a dress you wouldn't believe. The top was from two pillow cases in her mending basket. The front of the skirt was a dresser scarf a candle fell on and burnt a hole in, and one of her old *sashes* we used to test the flatiron on. (Italics mine 70)

As remarked above, the slaves' clothes are really ridiculous and pitiful. They are made of valueless materials. In Johnson's work, black slaves clothing is described as miserable one. Calhoun relates a very horrible slave situation. He explains:

This was the daily, debilitating side of poverty that no one speaks of, the perpetual scarcity that, at every turn, makes the simplest act a moral dilemma. On a nearby farm there lived a slave father and his two sons who had one blouse and pair of breeches among them, so that when one went off to work the others were

left naked and had to hide at home in their shed. True enough, Jackson and I fared better than they, but in linen handed down by Reverend Chandler or by his pious friends... (Johnson 47)

A very last form of violence that put the lid on this section that analyses slaves' physical victimization is summary and public execution. As pointed out earlier those black slaves are considered as properties of the white master, the master logically has the full right to use them at any end. In a nutshell, the life of the property is in the hands of the master. He can save it or put an end to it at any time if he wants. These rights granted to the master include execution in case of disobedience. As a result, many rebellious slaves come to tragic ends. Slaves' execution is a topical issue in all the literary works I'm studying. In *Middle Passage*, Calhoun's father, Riley Calhoun has been shot dead when he attempted to escape (Johnson 170). Nathan Irvin Huggins' words appropriately dramatizes the severe punishments slaves face in case of the master's annoyance. In *Black Odyssey: The African American Ordeal in Slavery* he explains: "Ordinary offenses against order were as a matter of course followed by corporal punishment – the lash, maiming, dismemberment. Offenses against property, life, and public safety were answered with capital punishment, often of an awful brutality – torture, the rack, beheading, burning at the stake, impaling." (86) This assertion of Huggins confirms the relevance of the idea that black slave's execution was not something new under the sun during slavery. Regarding all that has been said in this section, it is clear that the burning passion to make fortune, to show their dominance, power and competence has urged the slave traders to inflict extremely hellish physical suffering to the slaves.

So far, the most obvious findings to emerge from this study show that physical violence not only causes the degradation of the body but also impacts the inner life of the oppressed communities. But how does the attempt to control an individual using violence can affect the mind of this latter? The following section discusses the impact of that kind of victimization on the psychic life of the oppressed.

4.2 From Trauma to Violence and Internalized Oppression

[W]orse than that—far worse—was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. (Morrison 295)

This excerpt from Morrison's *Beloved* clearly reminds us that the trauma of slavery leads the black ex-slave to have a negative perception of their personality. Their psyche is filled with the traumatic experiences they faced during slavery. As a matter of fact, blacks seem to attach no importance to their personal self. In short, the traumatic experiences of slavery spoiled the blacks' self-concept and maintain them in position of permanent subordinates to use a term by Williams K. Williams. In his dissertation entitled "Understanding Internalized Oppression: A Theoretical Conceptualization of Internalized Subordination," Williams uses the term subordinate to identify individuals and groups targeted by oppression rather than the customary term "subordinate."

Nevertheless, Williams elucidates that he holds that term from Barbara Love who used it in 2010 for the first time. And, Love prefers this term for several reasons. In her explanation, *subordinate* is a noun while *subordinant* is an adjective modifying the noun. *Subordinant* parallels the use of dominant, but subordinate describes what is done to the *subordinates*. She then gives further justifications saying that if we were to parallel subordinate, we would need to write *dominate* and; using the modifying adjective to refer to groups of people seems to further objectify and reduce.

Indeed, the scars of slavery on the black self are not limited to the black body degradation. Actually, the wounds are far worse than one can imagine. Compared to the psychological wounds, the physical ones could be seen as mere scratches. Slavery caused several mental crises in the minds of black people. The upheavals entailed by slavery in the mind of the black range from the burgeoning of devilish thoughts to quite paradoxical and ironic inversion of the mind. This section then investigates the mindset of the slaves and ex-slave in the light of what is known as

internalized oppression. It focuses on how this canker is experienced by different traumatized persons. Before going any further, it is important to underline that oppression can be instilled in individuals' minds through violence, education, and even religion. It is all a process as Williams pinpoints. Commenting on Fanon and Memmi's conception of internalized oppression Williams concludes: "The effects they describe include a process through which members of subordinate groups are socialized to fit the needs and desires of the dominant group" (3). It means that the dominant group uses any means necessary to maintain the dominated in their position of inferiority.

The first aspect of internalized oppression and racism that trauma entailed in the minds of the oppressed people is the development of self-underestimation. Evidence of this self-underestimation is in *Beloved* through the attitude of Sethe. Sethe suffered from the ill-treatment of Schoolteacher and his nephews. The nephews raped her when she was pregnant with Denver and forcibly took her milk. Next, she has been cruelly whipped by Schoolteacher. These appalling tragedies make her unable to make head or tail of her own life. She feels lost, fractured, and dispossessed of her primordial essences which are first and foremost the existence as a human being then a woman and at last as a mother. Brutality emptied out Sethe's sense of self-concept and left only emptiness. To summarize, in the context of slavery, the hardships some black slave face leads them to negate their own existence and fall in what Fred Moten calls 'nothingness.'

By the same token, men's trauma rises to such a high degree that they become suspicious about even their own manhood. Halle who observed Schoolteacher's nephews brutalize his wife Sethe, but was powerless face to these horrors turned insane. In effect, he is the man and is supposed to protect his family, but the incapacity to assume plainly his role traumatized him, since it created in him the impression that he is coward, not deserving the actual title of a man. To be a man is not limited to the role of fathering children. A man worthy of the name should be his family's shield against any external threat. Otherwise, his manhood remains questionable. Being unable to assume what you are socially expected to do, is a kind of failure to take responsibility. This resignation could be seen as a way of not being what you are truly. Hence a deterioration of the person's self and identity.

Secondly, overexploitation of slaves makes them lost the sense of making profit. Losing the sense of making profit is a corollary of internalized oppression. It describes the extent to which the individual underestimates him/herself thinking that he/her does not deserve any profit. Baby Suggs is a perfect illustration of this category of slaves. In fact, after her emancipation the old lady is proposed to work at a slaughterhouse for daily payment. Something she finds unrealistic or even abnormal. Baby Suggs entitled to money; she could not believe it. The narrator underlines this abnormality as follows: "Baby Suggs lifted her hand to the top of her head. Money? Money? They would pay her money every single day? Money?" (Morrison 170) It means that, so manipulated and exploited the black slaves finally lost the sense of making profit or being rewarded for what they do. They have no sense of self possession. They only think of themselves as properties belonging to the master. In one word, they are commodities.

In addition, the analysis of the corpses shows that conceptions such as self-esteem, self-thinking or self-imagining are suppressed into the minds black slaves. They are institutionalized to identify themselves through derogatory terms. During slavery, coercion was used to prevent slaves from self-realization. The slave is only entitled to self-debasing thoughts. Paul D who suffered from the brutality of slavery physically and emotionally accurately describes this psychic emasculation of the slaves when he asserts: "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub (Morrison 86)."

At Sweet Home Paul D is humiliated with an iron bit on his mouth and receives stern beatings from the callous master; Schoolteacher. He also bears the pain of losing his brother and friends. In these conditions, Paul D absorbed a form of oppression that leads him to attach no importance to himself in the presence of the master. Their existence is trivialized. In presence of the white master, the black man's identity as a human is trampled on. The slave is institutionalized to think that in presence of the white master the black slave is reduced to nothingness.

Besides, another canker that spreads among the black community due to oppression and trauma is the demonization of the black self. The terrible events slaves witness or undergo during the middle passage and on the plantations likely suppressed the common sense in them and leave room to monsters and devil spirits. Delano accurately remarks in *Benito Cereno*, "slavery breeds ugly passions in man" (45). In that same vein, one can unquestionably utter that it is Sethe's individual experience and sufferings that make her capable of killing her own daughter. On top of Sethe, Paul D is another character whose personal experience makes him bloodthirsty. In fact, after the armada of tortures he is victim in different circumstances, Paul D finally developed a devilish spirit that urges him to try to kill Brandywine. The following lines clearly portray the transformation of the black being:

White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle white folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. (Morrison 234)

The novel of Johnson also provides accurate and relevant arguments that highlight the monstrous thoughts slavery brought about in black's mind. Calhoun accounts for how the malevolent actions of Falcon and the crew men transformed his mind. Thus, he suggests: "Clearly nothing on the *Republic* was as it should be, but it behooves me for the sake of my own character, shabby as this is, to explain how murderous my thoughts became after taking part in the captivity of the Allmuseri" (Johnson 66). Slavery invented monsters in human beings, the Allmuseri justify their incline to violence through it, they think that "the captain had made of Ngonyama and his tribesmen as bloodthirsty as himself ... he [Falcon] made of Ngonyama ...part of the world of multiplicity, of *me versus thee*" (Johnson 140). The tribe of Allmuseri was not part of multiplicity before their encounter with the crew and specially the captain. They were virtuous, however the crew's desire to possess them also arouse in them the desire to possess the crew too. Slavery had killed almost all their virtues replacing them with ill will and even murder. Then, it makes them cruel and able to commit manslaughter. Calhoun explains, "I lay back, short-winded and watchin' the Africans cut away Cringle's head, hands, feet, and bowels, and throw 'em overboard. They skinned him and cut the meat into spareribs, fatback, bacon, and ham (Johnson 174).

At last, the ultimate worst of all the negative influences of slavery on blacks is the upside-down logic it brought about in their minds. The uncommon change in the slave's way of thinking is perceivable through an ironic and appalling inversion of natural way of thinking. In fact, blacks have been inflicted so much suffering that they finally fall into a profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness and social despair. As a consequence, they praise death over life. They preferred to die instead of living an unlivable life. That is what makes life meaningless and death meaningful for them. They value death and devalue life. Actually, they think that freedom is in death. To put it bluntly, death becomes positive and life negative.

Firstly, let us consider the filicide of Sethe. This murder committed by Morrison's fictional character alludes to the real incident of Margaret Garner. This event has entailed social changes. It gave impetus to the debates upon slavery that led to the Civil War. However, this is not what is on focus in the present study. What is on focus is what led Sethe to commit this hideous murder. In fact, Sethe knows about the very awful story of her own mother who was a slave. And, Sethe herself is victim of inhuman treatments. That is why she wanted to kill her children hoping to spare them from the horrors of life. The narrator highlights:

[S]he was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her head cloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono.

Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe... (Morrison 192)

For Sethe, freedom is in death. This is obvious in her terms, as she confesses: "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is" (Morrison 240). And the narrator adds: "The best thing she [Sethe] was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean" (296). In effect, too abhorred by the horrors of life she chooses to join her dead mother with all her children notwithstanding she does not know what is happening over there.

Secondly, Paul D is another character who went through different tortures that traumatized him too much. In addition to the inhuman tortures Schoolteacher inflicted upon him, Paul D has been the victim of several other ruthless slaveholders. Thus, the worst and far bitter maltreatment he experienced was at Alfred, Georgia. The unspeakable cruelty of this place is noticeable through the words of the narrator who says: "Then he saw Halle, then the rooster, smiling as if to say, you ain't seen nothing yet. How could a rooster know about Alfred, Georgia?" (Morrison 270). This prison is so inhuman that even animals know about it. The life of blacks at Alfred in Georgia, as perceivable through the conditions of Paul D is an actual hell. Not only "iron is fastened around his ankles," the "wrists clamped," but is he also locked up in a cage with a "door of bars." The narrative voice gives more details of the callous conditions in this prison: "A door of bars that you could lift on hinges like a cage opened into three walls and a roof of scrap lumber and red dirt. Two feet of it over his head; three feet of open trench in front of him with anything that crawled or scurried welcome to share that grave calling itself quarters" (Morrison 125). So dangerous, inhuman and unlivable that this place is compared to a grave. This prison is in one word hell on earth.

Therefore, these extremely appalling conditions of detention influence too negatively the prisoners and make them lose the reason to live. In short, they are completely disgusted by life and they expect their salvation in the other unit of binary opposition i.e. death. Sima Farshid accurately puts:

The chained slaves are treated worse than horses and hounds; consequently, after a while the spirit of life dies in them. Working in chains on the fields, they express their frustration with life in their melancholic songs in which they sing "love songs to Mr. Death" and also kill "the flirt folks called Life for leading them on. Making them think the next sunrise would be worth it Only when she was dead would they be safe" (*Beloved* 1987, 109). None of the chained slaves thinks about escaping, since "if one pitched and ran – all, all forty-six, would be yanked by the chain that bound them" (109). Eighty-six days of that *death in life* make Paul D feel that "Life was dead", and just "beat her butt all day every day till there was not a whimper in her." (Farshid 498)

In *Middle Passage*, the trivialization of life and the valorization of death is perceivable through Rutherford's decision not to have children in this world. For, he finds it unnecessary to father a child in a so rough world. He considers that to bring a child into this world is unquestionably to condemn this latter to suffering. He claims: "How could I even dare to have children in a world so senseless?" (Johnson 67). Life means nothing for him.

Actually, a meaningful life is one in which physical, psychological and spiritual well-being and growth are allowed. And when this tends to be otherwise, it becomes an unlivable life. In this case death becomes the only path through which the subject can attain salvation. The murders committed by slaves on themselves or on people close to them should be regarded as 'mercy killing'. The assertions of Osagie constitutes relevant argument to back up this idea. Osagie states: "[M]any slaves [chose] the path of death as the only meaningful road to achieving freedom" (2000: 28).

5. Conclusion

As it can be noted, Morrison's *Beloved* and Johnson's *Middle Passage* offer a scathing critique of the slave society and the capitalist logic that underpinned it. Through a Marxist analysis, we have seen how Black people were reduced to commodities, objectified and traded for lucrative reasons. The characters of Sethe and Rutherford Calhoun perfectly illustrate this reality, showing how the dignity and humanity of Black people were systematically trampled. The authors denounce the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation that enabled the slave trade and slavery. Ultimately, these novels invite us to reflect on the consequences of this history on our present and future, and to consider ways to combat contemporary forms of exploitation and oppression. In reality, oppressed and frustrated black people began to perceive things from a wrong angle. They suffered from body degradation, bad feeding, over exploitation and sexual harassment. These terrible treatments during slavery developed abnormal behaviors such as violence, sadism and bloodthirstiness. Moreover, blacks started to think that freedom is in subjugation, and worst they value death and despise life. With regard to all these, it is possible to suggest that hard labor caused profound degradation of the slaves. Reading these works is therefore essential to understanding the power dynamics that have shaped our world and to imagining more just and equitable alternatives. Indeed, these novels show us that history is complex and multifaceted, and that the experiences of Black people under slavery are a crucial element of our collective heritage. It is therefore important to remember these experiences and to integrate them into our understanding of the current world.

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