Gender Differences in Slave Characters: a Feminist Critique of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave*

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Abstract: The focus of this study is to analyse gender differences between male and female slaves in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Frederic Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave*. There are many studies that have been carried out on slavery in Americas but few have focused on the different roles played by men and women slaves. This study interrogates gender differences between male and female slaves in American slavery. Using selected strands of the feminist theory, it analyses the differences in gender roles between male and female slaves in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Frederic Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave*. The study is a comprehensive qualitative library research that will proceed via close reading of primary, secondary texts and refereed journal articles.

1.0. Statement of the Problem

Scholars in American slavery have grappled with the question of gender differences among slaves in the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whereas some scholars hold that both male and female slaves were assigned different roles, feminist scholars such as Angela Davis hold that “[e]nslaved women labored no less than enslaved men” (105). She observes that unlike white women, female slaves performed the same roles as men slaves. Adrienne Davis reiterates this argument that “[i]n the middle of the nineteenth century seven-eighths of enslaved people regardless of sex were field workers. In 1800 when Santee Canal was built in North Carolina, enslaved women constituted 50% of the construction crew” (106). This study interrogates gender differences between male and female slaves in American slavery. Using the feminist theory, it analyses the differences in gender roles between male and female slaves in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Frederic Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave*.

Definition of terms

**Gender**- used in the study to refer to roles of men and women as prescribed by culture.

**Patriarchy**- used in the study to refer to male dominance.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Lois Tyson defines feminist criticism as a theory that examines ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women (83-92). She comes up with other tenets of the theory as follows:

i) Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, socially, politically and psychologically.

ii) In every domain where patriarchy reigns, the woman is the other; she is marginalized.

iii) All of Western civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchy.

iv) While biology determines our sex, culture determines our gender. Gender refers not to our anatomy, but our behavior as socially programmed men and women.

v) Feminist activity is aimed at promoting the position of women’s equality

vi) Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production.

The present study will employ the theory to interrogate whether women slaves are economically, socially and psychologically oppressed by American slavery. It also seeks to find out whether gender issues play a part in American slavery as an aspect of human production.

1.2. Introduction

Published in 1845, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is the gruesome tale of the life of Frederic Douglass, a slave who suffers the harrowing experiences of slavery in the American city of Maryland. He reveals horrible acts committed by slave masters on male and female slaves, for example murder, torture and exploitation. After hiring his labour out and being forced to give his wages to the master, he rebels and then flees to the free north in the United States.
States of America. Born in Tukahoe of a white slave master and black slave woman, in the south of the United States, Douglass is denied the right to the knowledge of his parentage, deprived of the mother’s first love among other cruel elements of slavery. In spite of their Christian faith, the slave masters display the callousness inconsistent to the Christian teaching of love and compassion. They assault the slaves on daily basis and shoot some of them. Fed up by the cruelty of the masters, Douglass flees the south to the free north and joins the anti slavery campaign. This study uses Frederic Douglass’ characters to distinguish the roles of women slaves from those of men. **Beloved** is the story of a female slave, Sethe who lives in Cincinnati in the United States. Sethe, a former slave, had four children with Halle, a fellow slave and Babby Sugg’s son. Baby Sugg’s labored as a slave for many years until her son, Halle worked hard and bought her freedom. After the death of their master, Mr. Garner, who practiced a benevolent form of slavery, his brother, and the school teacher, takes charge of the farm and reintroduces a dehumanizing slavery, for instance raping and milking female slaves in the presence of their male partners. Halle runs mad after witnessing the violation of his wife, Sethe and the murder of Sixo, a fellow slave. Expecting her fourth child, Denver, Sethe sets off to her mother’s in law’s home in the north. Along the way, she collapses out of exhaustion but is assisted by Army Denver, a white girl. She helps her deliver her baby in a boat and Sethe names the baby, Denver. She receives further help from Stamp Paid who rows her across Ohio River to Baby Sugg’s house. On the 28 day of her stay, school teacher arrives prepared to take Sethe back to the slave farm. Determined to save her children from the yoke of slavery, Sethe resolves to kill them. The baby dies and Sethe is jailed but the abolitionists fight for her release. The ghost of the baby she killed, who she now name, Beloved, comes back to haunt her. This study examines Morrison’s characters such as Sethe, Paul D, Halle and Babby Suggs to analyse gender differences between male and female slaves in the novel.

**1.3. Gender Differences in the *Narrative of Life* Frederic Douglass, an American Slave.**

Scholars of American slavery observe that female slaves were assigned different roles in the United States of America. Allen William in a US’ congress task force report entitled “History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the United States Capitol” notes that men slaves were used to construct the White house and got involved in activities like “coaxing stone from the earth without power tools of any kind; transporting, hauling, and carving… the enslaved work men had to endure isolation, loneliness in addition to their rigorous labors.” (6). It is evident that the slave system reserved certain tasks for men because the tasks demanded more energy that female slaves did not possess. William adds that the commissioner in charge of construction of the Whitehouse advertised on the newspaper:

<table>
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<th>Wanted to Hire, for next year to work on the Free stone quarries lately occupied by Public on Acquia Creek, Sixty strong active Negro men (6).</th>
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Female slaves are not wanted in this instance because the working conditions are not favourable for them. William asserts that the quarries were located in a snake infested island and nearby areas that swarmed with mosquitoes. He adds that the men slaves specialized in “mortar making, plastering, and carpentry”. On the plantations, they went around “building, repairing tobacco barns, cowsheds, hog houses, chicken coops, corn cribs, granaries, dairies and smoke houses” (12). On the other hand, Edmund Morgan cites two roles for women slaves that were imported to offset the sexual imbalance on white farms: “to make children and tobacco” (26). The making of children crowned her the most essential asset to her slave master. Angela Davis clarifies the female slave’s role saying:

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<th>The African slave woman was charged with keeping the home in order... as her biological destiny, the woman bore the fruits of procreation. As her social destiny, she cooked, sewed, washed, cleaned house and raised children”. (5)</th>
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It is clear that the female slave was relegated to more domestic roles, for instance house hold chores such as cooking, washing and raising children. She also bore slave children to be sold or hired out by the master. Davis notes that the slave and his labour did not belong to himself or her self. He or she did everything for the benefit of the master.

Slave masters therefore assigned male and female slaves different roles. In his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* the author presents to us instances
where gender differences among slaves were apparent. Slave masters assigned female slaves childcare roles where they ordered them to attend to babies with ultimate care. In the narrative, there is the instance of Fred’s wife’s cousin. The wife to Mr. Gile’s Hick instructs her to mind her baby. Overwhelmed by a three-day’s fatigue, she sleeps and lets the baby to cry. What follows is shocking. Mrs. Hick seizes an oak stick of wood by the fireplace and hits the girl on the nose and breast. She breaks her nose and breast, leading to a tragic end of her life (15). On the other hand, the male slaves in the story are assigned different roles. They are assigned field activities like looking after livestock, ploughing the farm with oxen, clearing bushes and others. The slave master, Mr. Covey, for instance, sends Frederick to the woods with oxen but the oxen smash the cart. When he returns, Covey rushes at him with the fierceness of a tiger, tears off his clothes and lashes at him... “cutting him savagely” (36). Male slaves are also free to learn skills like carpentry and masonry to hire them out. Frederick Douglass is an electrician and hires his skills over the weekend. However as a slave he is forced to bring all the proceeds to his slave master. The difference extends to breeding of slaves. In Frederick Douglass’ story, the masters tag female slaves as breeders and sell them out. But the male slaves are just hired for a period of time. Master Covey bought Caroline, a female slave, as a breeder. He hires a male partner at a price to breed slave children to multiply his wealth (37). Whereas the male slave returns after one year, the female slave, Caroline will remain in the home to slave children to multiply his wealth (37). Whereas the male slave returns after one year, the female slave, Caroline will remain in the home to proliferate Mr. Covey’s property by giving birth to slaves. Adrienne Davis observes that American slavery used the black woman slave to “reproduce the slave workforce through giving birth and serving as forced sexual labor to countless men of all races” (105). They were forced to have sex with both white and black men to replicate the slave population for profit.

Willie Lee Rose in her book Slavery and Freedom observes that there were many gender specific differences in slavery. The female slaves during the middle passage did not travel in holds below the deck but sea men allowed them to walk about the quarterdeck without shackles to be easily accessible to their sexual desires, (16). Once they were put up for sale, the most highly prized women were fertile women of childbearing age. In his letter to Joel Yance, Thomas Jefferson, a former US president, frankly stated that he “considered a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man on the farm for what she produces is an addition to the capital while the man’s labour disappears in mere consumption.” (42-43). However, the men slaves were always more expensive than women slaves. Therefore, the ratio of men slaves to women slaves soared to 2:1. Deborah White expounds that once purchased, the slave masters put “women to labor or used them as concubines or wives to male slaves” (37). The women also worked in the fields, nursed children, were midwives, seamstresses, house cooks, children’s cooks working ten hours a day. Pregnant slaves were treated better, not because the master cared, but because she brought into the world an important addition to the capital. Once a woman was past child caring age, she would work like everyone else until the age of sixty-five when she would be freed. Rose observes that Men slaves went through different experiences even during the middle passage. Scared of their physical strength, the slave masters bound them in steel and kept them below the decks. The slave masters did not prize men for their fertility but for their health and ability to perform hard labour. They were taught tasks to be drivers, blacksmiths, stablemen, carpenters, ditch men, skilled craftsmen and others. Engineers gave them a chance to move more often than women slaves did. The skills enabled them to hire themselves out, earn money, half of which went to master, although they finally bought their freedom.

1.4. Gender Differences in Morrison’s Beloved

In Tony Morrison’s Beloved, she clearly depicts gender differences between men and women slaves. Although sometimes the roles overlap, they differ to some extent. As earlier mentioned Morrison’s, Beloved is a heart-renting story of Sethe, a woman slave who escapes the brutality of slave masters at Kentucky to freedom at Cincinnati. Through the eyes of the heroine, her mother and mother in-law, Babby Suggs, the roles of female slaves are clearly distinguished from those of male slaves such as her husband, Halle, and his colleagues like Paul D, Sixo and others. The dehumanizing roles that slaves play cause a deep sense of alienation- estrangement from the self or rather internal fragmentation. Hira Ali observes that Beloved’s “fragmented structure” (1422) gives a hint of the characters’ sense of alienation that is a consequence of the dehumanizing nature of slavery. Morrison uses a number of flashbacks that disrupt the chronological order of events.

Sethe’s earlier experiences on Mr Garner’s farm depict gender differences between male and female slaves. The slave master sees Sethe as a breeder at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher values her for her fertility and that is why he tracks her down all the way to Cincinnati. Her children are being ‘raised as property to do the work that Sweet Home desperately needed”, Schoolteacher says he is glad she has ten breeding years (184). As Thomas
Jefferson asserted, female slaves were breeders bought to reproduce more slaves. Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother in law had eight children with six fathers (29). The narrator says:

| Her two girls, neither of whom had  
| Their adult teeth were sold and gone  
| And she had not been able to wave good bye. (29) |

These gender roles, as aforementioned depict the dehumanizing nature of slavery or slavery’s destruction of people’s identity. African people were reduced into mere property to be replicated like money and fixed assets. Baby Suggs is just like a cow that births eight calves from six bulls to be owned by the farmer. Men slaves on the other hand were also used to reproduce children on the farm by inbreeding. Poor slave masters who could afford to hire men slaves for breeding or too unfeeling to care, forced sons to have sex with their mothers to birth more slaves. In the story, Baby Suggs is happy with Mr. Garner’s type of slavery because he does not bring her sons to the cabin to have sex with her as they did in Carolina’ (173). On the other hand, masters did not sell men out as breeders but their sex was just rented out to reproduce strong slaves for their masters (173). Not all men slaves married. Baby Suggs wonders whether Mr. Garner would pick wives or her sons or will leave their libido to run wild. In fact, they have sex with cows. The dehumanizing nature of slavery is depicted again. The inbreeding, done at Carolina reduces Africans to animals. Do we not see Billy goats becoming full of milk, the infants being left… ‘I have seen the overseer beat them with raw hide so that the blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts’ (18). Being a woman was therefore a destruction of people’s identity.

Morrissy Marietta observes that the blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts (3). Being a woman was therefore a destruction of people’s identity. Furthermore, female slaves did household chores. They assisted their mistresses in everything. Baby Suggs assisted Mrs. Garner to do all household chores. The two of them cooked, washed, ironed, made candles, clothes, soap and cider, fed chickens, pigs, dogs, geese, milked cows, churned butter, rendered fat and fires. (172)

In other cases, women attended to multiple roles. They did all household chores and worked the field like men slaves. Morrissy Marietta observes that shortage of labour, particularly towards the end of slave trade prompted slave owners to use “women slaves as field labourers rather than household workers” (3). The women were all the time confined on the farm. They could not hire themselves out to make money for fear that men would have sex with them. The female slave Aunt Herster in the Narrative of Life of Frederick Douglass is a one such example. She goes out with a male friend and when she returns, the master “stripped her to the waist and commenced to lay on the heavy cow skin and soon the warm, red blood came dripping to the floor,” (6). In Tony Morrison’s novel, Sethe’s mother always worked the field. Sethe saw her very few times. By the time she woke up, her mother was in line. If the moon was bright, they worked by its light. On Sunday, “she could sleep like a stick.” (75). But this could not satisfy the master’s demands, she had to satisfy the sexual desires of white men. The aim of the sexual exploitation of the female slave was to the attack on the slave community. It was a means through which the slave masters expressed their weird sovereignty on the black community and emasculate the black man. Angel Davis observes that the sexual exploitation was part of “slavery’s utilization of productive capacities of every man, woman, child… and through it, the black woman was wholly integrated into the productive force” (6). She had to participate in the provision of labour for material production and also birth children to increase the labour force for the master.

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In addition to this, female slaves could hang babies using baskets on trees to work on the fields. Sometimes, the seamen had sex with the female slave (Sethe’s mother) and she gave birth to colored children. The old woman Nan says that they were together with Sethe’s mother at sea: “Both were take up many times by the crew” (78). But when she bore children, she loved Sethe most.

| She threw them away but you  
| The one from the crew she threw away  
| One on the island  
| Without names, she threw them  
| You she gave the name of the black man  
| She put her arms around him. (78) |

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desires. Nan says she and Sethe’s mother ‘were take up many times by the crew.” Apparently, they did not travel below the deck like men slaves but walked without shackles. The slave masters chained and placed men slaves below the deck. They move male slave Paul D in the novel from Kentucky to Georgia on a torturous journey. It is after he tried to kill his new master, Mr. Brandywine. They chain forty-six prisoners and flank them, armed with rifles. They shoot men slaves when they ask for breakfast

“They took my milk
And he saw it
And didn’t come
If he is alive
And he saw that, he would not
Step foot at my door;

He is shot (132). The theme of oppression is evident in the two instances. The man carries the seed and therefore the symbol of a particular community. Men slaves are symbols of the black race and since the whites want them exterminated, they oppress them and have sex with their women.

Finally, women slaves were subjected to sexual abuses and many others to humiliate them and men slaves. The worst humiliation over a tribe or nation is to abuse their wives and daughters sexually as they watch. Dubois attacks the sexual barbarity of the white race:

I shall forgive the south much in its final judgment day:
I shall forgive its slavery— for slavery is a world old habit
I shall forgive its fighting for a well lost cause and remembering that
Struggle with tender tears, I shall forgive its so called “pride of race”, the
passion of its hot blood— but one thing I shall never forgive, neither in this
world nor the world to come is its wanton and persistent insulting of black woman hood. (172)

The female slave Baby Suggs is compelled to have sex with her master to keep her third born with her. She conceived the master’s child and the boy, traded for lumber. Mr Garner is only interested in meeting his sex urge, but not in assisting the slave woman. (29). Schoolteacher takes Sethe to a stable and milks her. He gives the milk to white babies. She says, “They held me down and took it, milk that belonged to my baby (172). The milking is done in the presence of Halle, the husband. The white men demasculinize men slaves, they take away their traditional role of dominating and protecting their wives. In spite of Halle loving his wife, Sethe says:

“Want some breakfast, nigger?”
“Yes, sir.”
“Hungry nigger?”
“Yes sir”.
“Here you go.”

The last words on this utterance suggest sexual abuse thereby hurting Halle irrevocably. He ran mad after this experience. It does not end with Sethe. The female slave Ella is locked up in a room and two white men use her- father and son. For a full year, the two abused her in turns (146). The writer suggests that slavery destroys the identity of both the oppressed and the oppressor. Halle runs mad but the white man also loses his status as a person. Ella’s incident is bizarre. A father and a son share the same woman like goats. As the slavemasters abuse their powers, they lose their identity. A beast kills a hungry other like in Paul D’s experience.

1.5 Conclusion
In peculiar instances the roles of male and female slaves overlapped, for example they all worked in the fields. Nevertheless, male and female slaves played different roles by reason of the patriarchal nature of the slave system. The exploitation leveled against the woman slave was both sexual for pleasure and profit as opposed to the man who only offered labour on the farm. The violation and milking of Sethe in the stable and her mother’s sexual abuse en route to Americas are classical examples.

Works Cited

