

Original Article

Intersectionality of Slavery and Gender: Analyzing the Experiences of Black Women in Selected Writings

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Abstract

Intersectionality has created a new caste system which strictly adheres to the problem of colour, segregation, injustice, violence, and categorization on the basis of social class, race, and gender. The interconnected nature of social categorization combines multiple identities including racial identity, sexuality, disability, nationality, and gender; intersects each other, and results into discrimination and oppression. All forms of racial and gender inequalities reinforce each other, fortify identity politics, and ostracize on the basis of gender, caste and colour of skin. Slavery as an institution has also colossally impacted the question of gender inequality in American society. In the epoch of slavery, the women of different colour were the major victims of two-fold exploitation as being a woman and being a black racially. They were prime targets of sexual exploitation, physical violence, and free labor. In African American Literature, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are the two most prominent writings which depict the adverse effects of slavery, which has ruined several generations of the Blacks. The experiences of black women as enslaved workers, and victims of sexual exploitation are not less than a nightmare. The selected writings explicitly expose the ugly face of slavery that kept the black people particularly women in iron-made baskets for centuries. The study focuses on the discourse of two selected texts that how were black women maltreated, marginalized, sexually exploited and dehumanized.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Slavery, Gender, Women, African Americans, Racism

1. INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality, as a critical race theory, primarily investigates the question of interdependencies between individuals, existing social structures, categories and systems (Atewologun, 2018). Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), in her master piece *“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”*, introduced ‘Intersectionality’ to explain the nature of multidimensional experiences faced by Black women, and criticize single-axis analysis which utterly brushed-off their subordination through theoretical lenses. The structural and social categorization has led to identity-based politics which has helped the feminists, and antiracists to politicize the experiences of the women of colour. To highlight the vibrant exploitation and oppression of black women, Crenshaw further divided the issue into Structural Intersectionality, Political Intersectionality, and Representational Intersectionality (1991, p. 5). The division of intersectionality further helped to unveil, and deconstruct the institutionalized exploitation of black women in the white dominant American society (Carbado, Crenshaw, et al., 2013). Ironically, social activists, feminists, scholars, community organizers, American Congressmen, antiracists, and legal advisors also failed to think intersectionally,

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and consider the issue of the women of colour. The slave-owners were significantly benefitted from this very failure, and manipulated the question of enslaving black women as free workers and exploiting them sexually to produce free slave labour. All in all, the black women remained the principal subjects of different intersectional identities that led to inequality, oppression, and segregation during the era of American Slavery.

Slavery is morally reprehensible, and heavily relies on persistence, force and repugnance. And utterly advocates the violent domination of scandalous and dishonored individuals in human society (Patterson, 1982). As an institution, it colossally treats humans as merchandise, not allowing the strong sense of family, and community that humans need (Moniz, 2015), and blatantly disregards matriarchal family structure, and legitimizes the unjust use of power. The sexual exploitation of black women in the hands of white slave-owners of the South was a frequent and common practice. Though black men also suffered violence and self-humiliation, but it was worst for black women which engulfed their very basic right of being human. Cementing the ugly face of slavery, fugitive slave and African-American author Harriet Jacobs writes:

Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs and sufferings, and mortification peculiar to their own (1861, p. 119).

During the 2nd half of the 17th century, slavery took more drastic and furious transformation when enslavement was exclusively conditioned to color, race, and origin. It provided a roadmap to hereditary race slavery. The African-Americans became the principal victims (Wood, 2015). Pre-dominated by the whites, slavery turned into an institution that forcibly captivated, tortured and maltreated black community for structural and purposeful exploitation. From 1776 to 1865, the enslavement of Afro-Americans as human chattel (tangle property) remained legal in the United States of America. The lives of Afro-Americans, being enslaved, were no more disparate from that of livestock (Brace, 2004). The slave ships, slave auctions, slave coffles, and plantations were the sites that helped the slave owners to strengthen the enslavement of black people. Contrary to black men, the experiences of enslaved black women were more dreadful, humiliating and agony.

Being oppressed, physically tortured, over-worked with no compensation, undervalued and alienated from families, the black women became the core subject of slavery. They were predominantly subjected to trifold exploitation: being black, enslaved, and about all as women. The American laws played pivotal role in exploitation of African-Americans. In 1643, the lawmakers of Virginia imposed labour tax, called tithe, on enslaved African women. The white masters were directed to pay 1/10 tax for their slave women which further made them dependent, and helped slave-owners to control them in a more brutal way (Welch, 2004). The 1662 law of Virginia on slavery added more injuries to the sufferings of black women by giving legal status to their children as slaves of slave mothers. The chronology of exploitation stretched in all-dimensions granting every authority to the masters to sexually assault enslaved women (Virginia Laws, 2021). They were significantly forced to sex, and raped vociferously undermining their freedom and self-respect in particular. The enslaved women were exploited as being reproducers and workers. For the slave owner, black women were manipulated as workers in the pursuit of economic benefits, and as source of brutal sexual exploitation for the attainment of infant slave babies in free (West, 2014).

With the rise of slave population, slave-owners in the South also changed their methods of exploitation in order to ensure availability of the slaves for future. They were treated less as labors and more as reproducers as they were considered as naturally sluttish, more suitable for reproduction, and childbearing. Being subjected to sexual assaults of masters, women received a very trivial relief from physical attacks, but remained as subjects to reproduction of human chattel. The white mistresses, who always treated enslaved black women with hatred, anger and hostility, also extended purposeful sympathy aiming that enslaved women will bear more slave babies along with working at plantations. The derogatory proclamations of 'orthodox Reverend Francis Le Jau in 1709', and 'Peter Fountain of 1756', calling black women more fertile than white women, significantly encouraged the white slave masters to exploit, torture, harass, and rape slave-women as cheap sources of reproduction (Ibid, p.46). The black women were even forced to take second, third and forth bedfellows if they failed to bring child in a year or two from the first husband. Consequently, in the 2nd half of 18th century, the population of slave people in the South Carolina increased sizably (Morgan & Jennifer, 2004). The number of states in Southern America with enslaved black women increased from only two in 1820 to six states in 1860. Prominent African-American author W.E.B. Du Bois takes severe account on the American brand of slavery, and strongly condemns the sexual assaults of black women in the following words:

I shall forgive the white south much in its final judgment day," he writes, "But one thing I shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come: its wonton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust (Quoted by Balfour, 2005, P. 7).

The forced separation of women from their men became frequent practice. The policy helped to pave way for availability of sufficient labors at plantations and other workplaces. Selling enslaved men to long-distanced traders to keep them separated from women was the popular technique of the slave-masters. In "Narrative of Sojourner Truth and book of life", Sojourner explicitly depicts the miseries of separation, and pathetic state of black women being sold at the auction site. As she asks from her mother that, 'what makes you cry?' she would answer, 'Oh, my child, I am thinking of your brothers and sisters that have been sold away from me' (Gilbert, et, al. 1878, p.17). Almost every black family suffered the same luck of family separation. Obviously, it was an intentional strategy to destroy the matriarchal family structure of African Americans. The same account of slavery and family separation is skillfully taken in "The Story of Mattie J. Jackson: her parentage- Experience of Eighteen years in Slavery". Mattie Jackson who lived eighteen years as a female slave in the state of Missouri, narrates that right after the marriage of her parents, they were separated from each other. The slave owner namely Mr. Canory purchased her mother, and moved some twenty miles away. She recounts that my father used to meet my mother once in a week. They maintained abroad marriage (being unable to meet at home), and when her father was sold westward, she never met him again (Thompson, 1866, p. 7).

The separation of children from salved parents remained at the heart of slavery system. It also helped to build a sense among the black children of being naturally born slaves. The slave-owners significantly focused on increasing the growth of slave children. The population of slave children in the United States jumped to 3.9 million. Amongst, 56% were under the age of 20 (Curtin, 1972), but they were living in extremely miserable and pathetic state. Majority of slave children were subjected to vibrant psychological and physical traumas. Their experiences varied according to their working places and locations. Their experiences at Tobacco plantations were more horrific than at sugar, rice and cotton plantations (Brogan, 2001). In 1930s, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) conducted around two thousand interviews with former black woman slaves; having memories of being enslaved children, the majority of them revealed that they were less than 10 years old when the slavery was abolished (West, 2014).

Experiences of Black Women

The growing interests of historians and literary figures to know more about female slavery helped black women writers and their narratives to gain much importance and unveil the ugly face of slavery in the scholarly and literary world of America. The autobiographies of enslaved black women masterly exposed the brutalities of the white people against African-Americans in general, and women in particular. The experiences of black women are colossally pathetic and utterly complex which makes it categorically hard to focus on just one variable solely. The question of race, gender and social class significantly varies, and takes a new dimension with their experience at plantations, big houses (houses of slave-masters), and other working places. Gender, social class, and race shape their own structures along with experiences of the blacks in the South (Biswas, 2015). It even also helped out to deny any intended model that may undermine the authority of privileged white women and their womanhood. The rights of white slave-owners were legitimized to buy, and sell black people as human chattel in auctions. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* skillfully unveiled, and exposed the prevailing slave-absurdities that strengthened whites' cause of enslaving blacks for slavery.

The story of '*Incidents in the life of a slave girl*' revolves around the real life experiences of fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs. She uses pseudo name Linda Brent in her autobiography. Jacobs recounts realistic portrayal of sexual assaults, physical violence and exploitation at plantations she endured. The narrative explores the bitter challenges of slavery, and heart-wrenching choices made by her to protect her children, and escape slavery. Her courage in exploring the vulnerable path to freedom makes the narrative a testament of her spirit.

Despite the collection of very few slave narratives and literary archeology, the scarcity of genuine literature on American slavery was the core factor that helped white scholars to represent black women as ill-tempered, lustful and matriarchal. The slave narratives are the accounts of the life of former or fugitive slaves about their life and experiences. The majority of these narratives involve a sense of completely uniqueness, and sameness in styles of narration and experiences (Kyjakoa, 2016). Toni Morrison regarded slavery-centric novels as 'a kind of literary archeology' depicting the stories of slave

women missing from the records. She termed the past as archeology because of assembling together the world of black women which existed in fragments in the archives of history (Sharpe, 2003). The quest for upholding the status of black womanhood makes female-slave narratives different from the narratives of male slaves which primarily focused on systematic arrangement of male testimony. In *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, Douglass simply travels from slavehood to manhood without being harassed and sexually abused. On contrary, in *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs explicitly reveals her bitter experiences, and quest for female identity by becoming victim of sexual exploitation in the hands of white men, as she says;

No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence (Jacobs, p. 45).

In fact, sexual harassment, and insulting black womanhood was common practice, and camouflaged with Whiteman's legitimate right to expression against the black women. Rape was used as a tool by overseers at plantations to control workers women in a brutal way. And black women were left with no other option to opt. That is why; Jacobs (Linda Brent) compromised her chastity for the sake of survival which must not be termed as expression of self-autonomy or desire. Jacobs found no other option rather than engaging herself in sexual relation with Mr. Sands. Jacobs' narrative, regarded as the antecedent black feminist narrative, revolves around the themes of family separation, mothering, sexual harassment, community, womanhood, and emancipation. The life story of Jacobs masterly advocates the bitter states of other enslaved black women in the South. She narrates that when a slaveholder who was leaving for Texas, came to buy me, he offered up to twelve dollars, but Dr. Flint refused saying that, 'she is my daughter's property, and I have no right to sell her' (Ibid, p. 122). Dr. Flint dehumanizes black slaves, and considers her (Brent) mere a human chattel. It means, being black woman, Brent has no right to freedom and womanhood, but a tangle property in the hands of slave-owners and their children. The central theme of Jacobs's narrative also focuses on enslaved bodies of black women as legal property of whites, as Dr. Flint threatens her by saying that, 'Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you, that I can kill you, if I please?' (Ibid, p. 62). As mentioned earlier, they had a status of moving property (human chattel) in the hands of slave-masters, Jacobs utters her extreme grievance against her degraded and dehumanized status as following:

The bill of sale! Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion (Ibid, p. 300).

Jacobs conveys many dimensions of the same sexual abuse practiced by the white mistresses as she writes: 'it is deemed a crime in her wish to be virtuous' (Ibid, p. 5). The factor behind the aggressive attitudes, and violence of white mistresses was their husbands' interests in enslaved women. Mrs. Flint, the wife of slave-master, despite knowing that Brent is the victim of her husband's lust and atrocities, she doesn't change her attitude towards Dr. Flint, but behaves in a more aggressive way towards Brent. Mrs. Flint's this sort of attitude is the actual face of white women who were more concerned with their dignity, and status of being pure and virtuous. Even white women also used to guide, and support their husbands to take the 'illegitimate babies' of enslaved black women to the auction sites. This was another technique of white women to punish enslaved women for having sexual relations with their white husbands, and violation of their marriage's sanctity. The issue of family separation, which is the ugly face of slavery and remains at the core of every slave narrative, can also be vividly observed in Jacobs' narrative '*Incidents in the life of slave girl*', quoting that:

I spent the day gathering flowers and weaving them into festoons, while the dead body of my father was lying within a mile of me. What cared my owners for that? He was merely a piece of property. Moreover, they thought he had spoiled his children, by teaching them to feel that they were human beings (Ibid, p. 18).

This is the highest level of dehumanization of the black people particularly women. Brent (Jacobs) lives in a fragile state of life where she is not allowed to visit, and see her dead father who is just at a mile distance. The family separation was one of the most terrible factors behind adding pains to the injuries of slave women. Importantly, the title '*Incidents in the life of a slave girl*' also prognosticates that the author is sharing mere few incidents of her life, but not entire life experience. This very technique reveals, and reminds the readers to imagine lives of black women in the dark era of slavery (Rana, 2017).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) also represents the same dilemma of family separation, sexual

exploitation of black women, and violence against them. The plot of 'Beloved' is the refined modern literary work which immensely covers all those themes and objectives that were mentioned and described by fugitive and former slave writers. The subjects of freedom, sexual exploitation, forced family separation, self-respect, and motherhood are clearly portrayed (Moniz, 2015). The novel is based on true story of Margaret Garner who, in 1856, killed her daughter to prevent her return to slavery (Lowne, 2023). The 'Beloved' also begins few years after the escape of Sethe from slavery. Sethe and (her daughter) Denver live in Baby Sugg's doddering house. Baby Suggs is Sethe's mother-in-law. When the owner of her daughters known as 'schoolteacher' comes to take Sethe's daughter back, she tries to kill her children to avoid slavery, but 2 years old daughter is being killed whom Sethe, later, names as beloved- also inscribed on daughter's tombstone (Sirkka, 2011). The infanticide by Sethe was deliberately done to save her children from the horrific of slavery. She knew that my children would not endure the cruelty of slavery, so she had to kill her children, and this was probably the last option available with every enslaved mother.

Gender was not the only factor, but being black also played crucial role to add more to the deplorable state of the blacks. The black women were victims of double exploitation. In 'Beloved', Toni Morrison has masterly highlighted that Sethe was not only subject to gender discrimination, but also the prime target of white racists for being black. And this identity was enough to be humiliated, harassed, and exploited. They were victims of double-edged sword; being exploited sexually, and becoming victim of colour problem. Alienation from family members, and new born babies, and sending their parents to other parts were the routine practices against black community in general, and women in particular. The cause behind these inhuman and violent tactics was also to destroy the concept of strong family structure of African-Americans (Podder, 2018). The practice was heinously naturalized that slave women have no legal right to get access, and live with your children. Contrary to white's malpractices, and racism, black women not only maintained natural relation with their beloveds, but also offered every kind of sacrifice to sustain family relationship. Sethe, being black mother, established a new custom for other enslaved women that infanticide is also an option to save our children from the curse and brutalities of slavery (Christian, 1985). Justifying her violent act, she explains:

Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children (Morrison, 1987, p. 384).

Toni Morrison does not depict the worsened state of a single enslaved black mother-Sethe, but also advocates the case of millions of other women too who are the prime subjects of slavery and problem of colour. The very first lines "Sixty Millions and more" of author's preface to "Beloved" explicitly reveal her motif that this is the story of sixty millions back people. Through narrator, Toni exposed the bitter and ugly face of slavery that swallowed millions of blacks. For a black woman, it was unimaginable to be a mother and slave at the same time. As Sethe narrates that, 'Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love' (Ibid, 309). Despite knowing that she is a mother, but she is unable to love her own children for being mere the property of her slave-master. This is the finest face of dehumanizing blacks, and segregating them from normal humans particularly whites. They were not only dehumanized, but also shelved in animals' category, and utterly blamed for being immoral, senseless, worthy to be enslaved and auctioned. When Sethe tried to justify the act of infanticide, her master blatantly equated her with animals, and says that, 'You got two feet, Sethe, not four' (Ibid, 314). Inclusion of white's description of black image, and relating them with animals further helped Toni Morrison to debunk the discriminatory, and racist attitudes of slave-holders towards the black community. For Morrison, comparing blacks with animals is the highest degree of dehumanization and otherization. And slavery has already endorsed all these tactics to strengthen white's hegemony and monopoly against blacks (Wike, 2017). She exposes white racism by depicting the miseries of black women in the South that slavery as an institution blatantly restricted black motherhood and womanhood for more centuries.

Toni Morrison, like Harriet Jacobs, concentrates on the theme of motherhood. Both of the protagonists suffer pains and violence. Sethe and Jacobs have depicted their love for children in a sacrificial way. Sethe sacrifices as a loving mother by killing her daughter (Beloved) to save her from the troubles of slavery. The experiences of past, full of pains, has left her with the only option to infanticide. Jacobs, too, sacrifices and tolerates the hardships for a future free of slavery for her children. She denies concubinage with

Mr. Flint, escapes, and spends many years in the attic of her grandmother's house to see growing her children. Finally, she escapes to North, and reunites with her family.

2. CONCLUSION

Intersectionality created a caste system that was based on social, racial and political grounds. Intersectionality, as a broad concept, helped the authors and scholars to understand the hidden structure that has strengthened the question of inequalities, atrocities, injustices, and violence against women of colour. Harriet Jacobs' narrative and Toni Morrison's Beloved resiliently portray and unveil this very question of racism and violence against black women. Both texts significantly expose the other-face of the slavery that made the lives of the enslaved women terrible and dreadful. The African American men significantly suffered from the brutalities, barbarism and racism of the white masters, but the way black women were made to face the monster of slavery was utterly wild, inhumane and intolerable. In other words, they were the victims of double-edged sword of slavery: sexual assaults and being unpaid workers.

Competing Interests

The authors did not declare any competing interest.

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