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# The Psychology of Slavery: A Literary Discourse

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### ABSTRACT

The Trans-Atlantic slavery is a well documented human trafficking enterprise which gained international notoriety for the inhuman way in which it was conducted. The fact that such an infamy was allowed to thrive for centuries under the watchful eye and with the connivance of the most civilized nations in the world calls for continual investigation. This paper considers slavery as a literary enterprise. It explores the cognitive framework that made the capture, trafficking and the exploitation of Africans intelligible in the world where religious and humanist principles reigned. Fiction and nonfictional works of slavery depict various ways by which slaves were oppressed. This paper, which is an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, intends to portray the fact that the perception of black people as subhuman creatures was the main reason for their inhumane treatment. From the analysis, it is shown that the slaveholders instituted slave management techniques which were primarily aimed at implanting slave mentalities among the black people. The main motivation for the psychological enslavement of the blacks was the perception that Africans, by virtue of their race, were natural slaves and should be induced to accept that status. The analysis is informed mainly by social dominance theory and to a little extent classical conditioning psychological learning theory.

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### 1.0 Introduction

The discovery of the Americas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century ushered in a period of intense activity as European countries competed for a share of trade and the untapped fortunes of the New World. With its conquest and subsequent colonization of the American continent, came the dire need for a huge supply of labourers to work mainly in mines and plantations which had been established. The labour from the native population proved inadequate. Exposed to exhausting works and abuse which they had never experienced before, the race of West Indians, popularly known as Amerindians, perished in large numbers and nearly became extinct (Goodell, 1852). Faced with this complex situation, the Spaniards resorted to importation of Africans who were believed to be "a hardier race" (Goodell, 1852). This decision led to the infamous Trans-Atlantic slave trade in which numerous shiploads of captured Africans were dispatched through the Middle Passage destined for Caribbean islands and continental America as slaves. Thus, as Muhammad (2003) observes, Trans-Atlantic trade took root and evolved into an accepted norm in the international community. In this work, we analyse this infamous practice from a literary perspective to uncover the ills inherent in the practice. The aim is to show how dominant groups in history have exploited historical events to their advantage irrespective of how they affected the subordinate groups. Lessons drawn from such an analysis are quite informative since instances of dominant groups exploiting subordinate ones in society never cease to occur in the human race. As such we are made to see the intrigues that such dominant groups use to keep the less privileged groups at their mercy and service.

#### 1.1 Social dominance theory

Stated in their own words, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) advance thus "social dominance theory argues that intergroup

oppression, discrimination and prejudice are the means by which human societies organize themselves as group-based hierarchies, in which members of dominant groups secure a disproportionate share of the good things in life and members of subordinate groups receive a disproportionate share of the bad things in life". We find no better position to advance our arguments in this paper than the one propounded by this theory. Indeed, as we shall see in the discussion that follows, all that happens is nothing other than outright oppression, discrimination and prejudice that is practiced by slaveholders against the slaves. Slaveholders institute certain strategies to achieve their dominance over their slaves. Some of the strategies are clearly enacted by the state apparatus whereas others are formulated at community and slaveholder's level. As a consequence of this, the two groups live different lives. The dominant group enjoys good housing, social relationships, good health facilities and above all rules and controls the subordinate group. On its part, the subordinate group receives bad things such as poor housing, poor health services, is denied free social relations and even worse self-determination. All this can be clearly explained by the tenet of the social dominance theory that sees this disproportionate allocation of resources as determined by the dominant group. Another tenet of the social dominance theory is that the dominant group will do everything possible to justify the inequitable allocation of resources. Due to the skewed nature of the first two tenets in favour of the dominant group, what follows is behavioral tendencies among the subordinate group that accepts the status quo in society. One of these tendencies is social dominance orientation whereby the subordinate group tends to accept its subordination. Secondly is behavioural asymmetry where members of the dominant group advance their position through certain social behaviours and on the contrary members of the subordinate group engage in behaviours that

damage their group. Put briefly, these are some of the tenets of social dominance theory that form the toolbox used in this analysis.

## 2.0 Slavery and dehumanization

The cognitive framework that made chattel slavery intelligible was structured by principles of dehumanization and exploitation. This cognitive framework can be located by an in-depth exploration of attitudes and mindsets of slave dealers and slaveholders as portrayed in literary texts. David Livingstone Smith, who carried out an intensive study on the theory of dehumanization, affirms that dehumanization is indeed psychological as “it occurs in people’s heads” (Smith 2011). He argues that dehumanization is the way we think or conceive certain groups of people as being less than an average human in intellect, countenance and evolution. Dehumanization, it can be argued, makes it possible for one group of people to subject the other to inhumane treatment by excluding them from moral consideration.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* certainly provides an insight into white men’s conception of the black people from the perspective of the former slave. In a speech she gave at the forest clearing, Baby Suggs (one of the characters in the novel) informs her fellow freed slaves that the white people hated anything about them. They only loved slaves’ eyes gorged out; skin on their backs flayed; and their hands tied and chopped off. This proves that the white people regarded black people as creatures whose feelings need not be taken into consideration.

Morrison’s vision of slavery is that it generated much abhorrence against the blacks. Despite their invaluable contribution to the American economy through their torturous drudgery, they were detested and degraded largely because of their skin colour. The unfounded theories of racial inferiority and natural slavery undoubtedly provided moral and legal aperture that made it easy for the white settlers to degrade, torture, maim, kill and brutally exploit African and Native Americans.

Smith (2011) observes that dehumanization, it would seem, was the only chance to reconcile the economic attractiveness of slavery with the enlightenment vision of human dignity. It was a ruse effectively used by slave merchants and slave owners to justify their African captives as chattels. The pro-slavery advocates embraced and even championed certain philosophical views which sought to doubt the humanity of black slaves and therefore exempt them from moral consideration. Natural slavery formed the core of their arguments. Ideas of natural slavery have their antecedent in the fourth century Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who posited that natural slaves, the barbarians, suffer from “deficiency of reasoning” and therefore are incapable of leading independent, autonomous lives on their own without “natural masters” (Garnsey, 1996). The best option the natural slaves had in order to guarantee their security and utilize their potential was to live under subjection to a master who would naturally tap their bodily capacities for his benefit. With such ideas, the stage seems to have been set for the dehumanizing experiences of slaves. Slaveholders appear to have exploited the psychology of slaves so much so that the enslaved would succumb to their less than human position in life.

## 3.0 Dehumanization as portrayed in literature

Certain works of fiction, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, portray, often in an oblique sense, that an encounter between people or groups from different

civilizations often results in mutual feelings of aversion. These feelings are sometimes followed by an impulse to dehumanize the Other. Caliban, a character in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, has been shorn of his humanity: he is referred to as a freckled monster, a wild man “not honored with a human shape” (Shakespeare 2000). Dehumanization can be seen, here, to have started when Caliban’s island was taken over by Prospero and his daughter Miranda. Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, similarly, reveals instances where the humanity of the island’s inhabitants is degraded as cannibalistic savages. In many instances the physical appearance or countenance of a person could provide grounds for their dehumanization.

In *Beloved*, Sethe’s first encounter with dehumanization took place when she inadvertently overheard Schoolteacher telling his pupils to put Sethe’s “human characteristics on the left”; and “her animal ones on the right” and, after which, line them up (Morrison, 1987:369). Having been brought up as a rational human being by the farm’s owner, Mr Garner, Sethe is greatly perturbed from what she heard from her present master, the Schoolteacher. This new knowledge challenging her humanity brings her so much confusion and mental anguish that she confesses that her “head itched like the devil” as if someone was sticking fine needles in her scalp. This behaviour clearly indicates that the dehumanizing experiences caused intense mental anguish and confusion to the slaves. The fact that Sethe would narrate this particular incident to her children eighteen years later suggests the traumatic consequences of the experience.

Dehumanization as earlier stated is psychological; it is the way we conceive others as subhuman creatures (Smith 2011). For slave merchants, it was convenient for them to think of Africans as subhuman because this would provide moral sanctioning for their trade. But this was not enough; they also treated the captured Africans as subhuman and took steps to ensure that the enslaved Africans perceive themselves so. This was done mainly by implanting a sense of inferiority and helplessness in their psyche with the hope that in so doing, the captives would be kept perpetually enslaved. In his analysis of Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*, Mitchell (2008) found that “seasoning” of captured slaves and development of slave mentalities, was a major aspect of slave management in the South. Such language and practice measures quite closely to the principles of classical conditioning where one is made to respond involuntarily to stimuli. Seasoning of slaves in this case was meant to make the slaves accept their condition as natural without questioning it.

Development of slave mentality among the captives started immediately after their capture. The first step was to crush the supposed proud, arrogant, and independent spirit of African men and women so they would be amenable and subservient commodities in American slave markets (Watkins, 1981). To achieve this, the captives were often subjected to physical and psychological torture. Watkins also observes that it became necessary to destroy African human dignity, remove their names and status, disperse groups in order to destroy their common language, and sever any attachment to their African homeland. Unable to stand frequent torture and terrorization, many slaves repressed any feelings of humanity and adopted slave identity imposed on them by their captors. The process of transitioning black people into chattel slavery involved undermining their humanity through physical terrorism; denial of identity or individuality; denial of history

and family lineage; denial of love and familial relationship; and denial of autonomy and agency.

These practices by the dominant group, namely slaveholders, against the subordinate group, namely slaves, are meant to justify the position of slaveholders (Sidanus and Pratto, 1999). Whereas some are invented by individual slaveholders, others are supported by national legislation. As seen in the discussion, these inhumane practices imposed on slaves involuntary emotional and physical responses such as exaggerated love and inability to recover the normal self (Woolfolk, 2004).

### 3.1 Physical terrorism

In her reconstruction of the Middle Passage, Morrison (1987) uses the revenant *Beloved* to describe inhumane conditions in the slave ships. In her monologue which bespeaks of the trauma and horrors of the perilous sea journey, it is revealed that the decks where slaves were held were overcrowded, stuffy and dark. *Beloved* is able to see the dead man next to her only because "daylight comes through the cracks" (Morrison, 1987:210). The inmates, the human cargo, are so dehydrated that they cannot sweat, shed tears or pass urine. To add to their abjection, their white captors, indifferent to their plight, give them their own urine to drink.

Rape and torture are the main instruments of terrorism used by the slavers especially against captive females on the ship. Narrating her ordeals while on the ship, Nan tells Sethe that her (Sethe's) mother and she were raped severely by the white slave traders and crew. As a result, Sethe's mother became pregnant and chose to throw away all the children conceived through rape (Morrison, 1987). The purpose of such violation was to impress upon the captive women that they did not own anything, including their bodies. This was part of slave seasoning: transforming captured African women into subservient slaves who would be totally submissive to their new masters. They were expected to accept all sorts of sexual overtures from their masters or studs assigned to them. This was definitely the reality for Baby Suggs in *Beloved*.

The black female slaves were expected to live up to mammy figure stereotype created by the dominant ideology to "justify economic exploitation of house slaves" (Collin, 2000). The mammy image inscribed onto black womanhood was that of faithful, submissive, and obedient domestic servant capable of "loving, nurturing and caring for her white children and family more than her own". But by killing all the babies conceived through rape, Sethe's mother shows that she was unwilling to be a breeder and sex object contrary to the expectations of slavers.

Another means used by the slave traders to transform captive Africans into chattels was branding. This mean act was often carried out in a way that dehumanized captured black slaves by treating them like animals. *American Heritage Dictionary of English Language* (2011) defines branding as a mark of identity or ownership burned on the hide or skin of an animal using a hot iron, or burned into the flesh of slaves or criminals. One can easily note the sadistic application of the mark on the rib right under women's breasts intentionally done to elicit maximum pain and humiliation, and in total disregard for privacy, dignity and feelings of the captured slave. In the extract below, Morrison demonstrates how this dehumanizing act was done:

Back there she opened up her  
dress front and lifted her breast and pointed  
under it. 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, 1987:61)

The degrading ritual of cutting an impression into the flesh of captives using a branding iron had symbolic and psychological significance both to the captives and their captors. For Sethe's mother, the mark was not only the permanent symbol of her identity, but it was also a painful reminder of the time she was shorn of her humanity and forcefully transformed into a chattel. That explains why when her young, innocent daughter, Sethe, asks if she could have a mark too, her mother slaps her face. Sethe confesses that she did not understand her mother's reaction until the time she got her own mark. Here, Sethe obviously uses "mark of my own" metaphorically to refer to the dehumanizing experience she would later go through at the hands of Schoolteacher, which "punched the glittering iron out of" her eyes "leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (Morrison, 1987:17).

After the initial attempt at transitioning captured Africans into chattels in the ships, more effort was put into developing slave mentalities among enslaved blacks. Brutal and inhumane treatment of slaves by their masters still continued being the norm. Under the law, the slave owners had absolute power over the lives of slaves in their possession. Herein we see practices of the dominant group being justified through national legislation as argued by the social dominant theory. Whipping, burning, maiming, imprisonment, starvation and hanging were some of the methods of punishment devised and effectively used to instil fear, compliance to masters' code and acceptance of the dehumanized status. Sethe receives quite brutal treatment when she reports to her mistress, Mrs Lillian Garner, how the Schoolteacher and his pupils had mistreated her behind the stable. Despite being at an advanced stage of pregnancy, she is whipped so terribly that the nerves in her back are incised and then get lifeless. Sethe refers to her back as "wrought iron maze" with "revolting clump of scars" (Morrison 1987:42).

Unable to stand the savage whipping and the degrading treatment by Schoolteacher and his nephews, Sethe flees from Sweet Home disregarding her precarious and fragile state, and would probably have died on the way had she not met a white girl called Amy Denver, who offered to help her. The dead scars are so dreadful that Denver could not hide her shock and repulsion at the sight.

While Sethe's inhumane whipping and rape stems from her apparent refusal to be Schoolteacher's breeder, Paul D's nightmarish experience starts when he attempts to run away from Sweet Home with other men. The escape plan is however foiled by Schoolteacher, his pupils and neighbouring slaveholders and Paul D and Sixo suffer the consequences. The worst treatment Paul D ever receives occurs in Georgia where he is sent after trying to kill the man Schoolteacher had sold him to. The treatment he and forty-six other slaves receive is extremely dehumanizing as they were impounded into the underground cages with "anything that crawled or scurried welcome to share that grave calling itself quarters" (Morrison, 1987:207). And in the morning before they could start walking across the field again, they all have to be chained to a thousand-foot chain.

The experience is so grim that Paul D remembers it as eighty-six days in which life was dead. The situation becomes extremely nasty when it starts raining so heavily for many

days until slave-holders, in total disregard of slaves' safety, decide to lock them up in the boxes till it either stops or lightens so a "Whiteman could walk, damn it, without flooding his gun and the dogs could quit shivering"(1987:214).

Inside the underground cages, the inmates become more miserable because of the water in the trench. They have to squat in muddy water, sleep above it, and pee in it. With the rivulet of mud oozing through the boards of the roof, and the ditch dangerously caving in; panic and confusion reign among slaves. The threat of being smothered in the mud, and the absence of guards to help them, makes Paul D and the other slaves struggle out of the boxes and escape through the fields.

The traumatic experiences Paul D goes through so much alienate him from himself that he starts questioning his manhood and his value as a man. His inability to deal with the painful and humiliating past forces him to develop a self-defeating coping strategy: repression. He keeps his excruciating experiences "in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" where its lid rusted shut (Morrison, 1987:144).

Sixo, another Sweet Home man, is caught while trying to escape and is burnt alive. The burning of Sixo is a clear indication that Schoolteacher wants to inflict the worst possible pain as a deterrent to other slaves. Schoolteacher, however, feels a sense of loss and defeat because he is unable to crush Sixo's resisting spirit even as he burns to death.

The burning of Sixo can provide another angle to look into the reasons behind taking extreme actions against certain errant slaves. While killing of a slave could be seen as a severe warning to others, or an expression of disgust; it could possibly also be an expression of fear. The fact that Sixo is immune to Schoolteacher's intimidation only makes him a formidable threat to Schoolteacher and his unfounded theory of the Black's subhumanity. Schoolteacher's use of violence and dehumanizing treatment of slaves does not succeed in bringing order and progress; on the contrary, it reverses all the gains that had been made so far on the farm.

The brutal torture and violation of slaves' bodies leaves severe mental injuries that take a long time to properly heal. In *Beloved*, the rape ordeal experienced by Ella and Sethe's mother so much traumatizes them that they chose to kill the babies conceived through the rape. Ella's ordeal also negatively affects her future as it contributes to her disgust for sex.

Sethe is probably the only Sweet Home female slave who suffers the most violation as she is raped and savagely whipped. Farshid (2012) observes that the brutal violation of Sethe's body indicates her mortification and diminishment to less than human status. As a result of the savage treatment, she develops abnormal love for her children whom she regards as "the best part of her that was clean" (Morrison, 1987:475). The violation of Sethe's body makes her feel so unclean that she starts conflating her identity with that of her children. This abnormal obsession eventually drives her to kill her daughter in order to "protect" her from the slavery which she believes is the worst form of death – spiritual death. The traumatic experience she goes through at Sweet Home, at Schoolteacher's instigation, completely transforms her into a potentially dangerous "creature" who could easily "bite your hand clean off" (1987:288).

### 3.2 Denial of identity

Supporters of slavery were unwilling to recognize the slaves as men and women because this would mean accepting

their humanity. They would be forced to denounce slavery which could not only threaten their economic interests but also their sense of self. Black people were evidently critical in the construction of the White identity in that they acted as a foil. In an interview with Angelo (1989:255), Morrison delineates her views concerning this issue in the following words:

"Black people have always been used as a buffer in this country to prevent class wars, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations. If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other's throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for *me*—it's nothing else but colour. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, I am not *that*. 'So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of *me*.'"

Here Morrison seeks to portray the fact that all European groups that migrated to America achieved unity because they shared a common negative attitude towards the Black. The fact that they were not black gave them a commonality which, in turn, resulted in unity that is the bedrock of American political and economic stability. The implicit argument here is blackness as a race designates inferiority and a fetishized image of what the dominant White race refuses to be. Frederickson (1972) endorses Morrison's view adding that, stereotyping and discriminating against the Black Americans became necessary in order to protect the white American sense of self. Thus while denying them stable identity, the white people contrived and bestowed upon the black people an identity that suited their own conception of the black people. This contrived identity, as Morrison argues, reflected all that the White is not.

Recognizing individuality of a black person was definitely a serious blow to the Whiteman's sense of self. Thus when Mr. Garner bragged about how he had raised his "niggers" as "men", he caused serious discomfort among fellow white slave owners (Morrison, 1987:21). They totally disagreed with Garner, arguing that black slaves did not deserve to be regarded as men. Sometime their argument would escalate into a physical fight. The fact that the slave owners would engage in a fight just to defend their right to dehumanize suggests how significant this was to their sense of self.

Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave* is another instance which sheds more light on the assumption that construction of white identity depended on denigration of the enslaved blacks. Morrison(1992), in her examination of this text, notes that even the title of the novel epitomizes the racist hierarchy that permeates the whole text in that, Nancy, the slave girl has been denied her identity as an individual by being simply referred to as "the slave girl". Sapphira, an invalid who believes that her husband is sexually attracted to the young slave girl Nancy, invites her lecherous nephew Martin to visit in order to rape the slave girl and render her unattractive to her husband again. She even persuades Till, Nancy's mother, to join her in her evil conspiracy. Sapphira's schemes at the end do not make Nancy any less attractive to her husband. With the urging of Sapphira's abolitionist daughter Rachel, Nancy runs away. That the slave girl, Nancy, has to be urged by a white girl to run away from the obvious abuse she faces effectively highlights the "paucity of imagination and intellect Cather accords black characters" (Li, 2010). Morrison further questions the integrity Cather affords Till especially regarding

her complicity in the rape of her own daughter. The obvious disruptions in the narrative coherence are the pointer to the fact that Sapphira's identity and power depends on the debasement of her nubile slave girl, Nancy.

Both Nussbaum (1995) and Kelman (cited in Smith 2011) concur that when we perceive one as a human, we confer upon them identity. Kelman proposes that a human basically needs to be considered as an individual: independent, distinct, goal oriented and able to make their own decisions. When one is shorn of humanity, Nussbaum observes, they are considered fungible: parts of undifferentiated mass which Smith pejoratively refers to as "photographic reprints of the same negative"; violable: permissible to break up or violate; a chattel which can be bought or sold; and as objects whose autonomy, agency, experiences and feelings are either wanting or need not be taken into consideration. Judging from the above assumptions, Cather's characters, Nancy and her mother Till, have evidently been denied individuality.

Slaves were often simply referred to as "niggers" rather than being called using their own personal names. One could argue that reference to "nigger" as a name was meant to lump slaves as inseparable and indistinguishable from one another whether one was darker or lighter in complexion. This demeaning term was therefore intended to impose rigid categorisation between the blacks and the whites. A closer look at Hemingway (1996), reveals how the reference to the black man in the text as "nigger" seems to deprive him of his humanity and his distinctiveness. The black man Wesley is constantly referred to as "the nigger" while Harry Morgan, the white man, is referred to as "the man". There is a glaring contrast between the two men in the context: Wesley acts as a foil – unfree, nonentity and serviceable – all that Harry is not. In the same text, Marie hilariously recalls a moment in Havana when Harry smacked a nigger who had said something to her. Laughing so much at the incident Marie says:

That was the first time I ever  
Made my hair blonde that time  
there in that beauty parlour on the  
Prado. They were working on it all  
afternoon and it was naturally so  
dark they didn't want to do it and I  
was afraid I'd look terrible, but I  
kept telling them to see if they  
couldn't make it a little lighter, (Hemingway, 1996:197)

Morrison (1992) finds logical connection between the two scenes in the above excerpt: the encounter with the nigger and dyeing of the hair blonde. She argues that, threatened by the ease with which the black man approached, Marie had to reassert her whiteness forthwith by transforming her hair. It seems plausible that the encounter with "the nigger" in Cuba was instrumental in making Marie re-evaluate her identity as a white woman.

Denial of identity had adverse psychological consequences on the enslaved black people. The effects became more conspicuous after the emancipation. In the words of Morrison (1987), attaining freedom for slaves was the easiest part, but claiming the lost identity was the hardest part. For people who had been accustomed for so long to regard their bodies as their master's property, repossessing them was an uphill task. This is in line with the social dominance tenet which explains that the subordinate group gradually accepts its subordination. As such, this group exhibits a social dominance orientation identifying it as the less privileged one (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). Having

reclaimed her own selfhood, Baby Suggs spent plenty of time in the church pulpits and in the bush clearing helping her fellow freed slaves take possession of their freed selves and thereby become their own masters. Indeed, this is a classic case of classical conditioning.

The former slaves had generalized and become used so much to their status that even when they are in a different status they fail to recognize the difference and instead continue to behave and act as their former selves (Woolfolk, 2004). It is as if they had undergone severe classical conditioning such that even when the stimuli they had got used to is removed, they still could not extinguish their old habits.

Paul D's dehumanizing experience with Schoolteacher and in Georgia makes him question whether his manhood is natural or master Garner's creation. He had been raised to regard himself as a man who could literally do anything permissible within Sweet Home. But his sense of self is severely dented when Schoolteacher's abuse changes him into "something less than a chicken" (Morrison, 1987:141).

### 3.3 Denial of autonomy and agency

Apart from denial of individuality as clearly illustrated above, slaveholders endeavoured to suppress the autonomy and agency of their slaves. Autonomy and agency can be considered very vital elements of humanity and their suppression therefore can be seen as a plot to further entrench slave mentality among Africans. It was a slave management technique used effectively by the slaveholders to instigate powerlessness among the enslaved people. Powerlessness was enforced among the slaves in antebellum America by denying them rights to education and inhibiting their human capacity. Powerlessness can be associated with inability to make decisions affecting one's life and actions; lack of authority, status and sense of self; and inability to develop one's capacity and exercise full human potential (Young, 2004).

Frederick Douglass had experienced the liberating power of literacy when he was Captain Auld's slave, and as a result, was able to understand the "soul killing effects of slavery" (Douglass, 1845:12). He confesses that, as a slave, learning to read became a curse rather than a blessing because it opened his eyes to his pathetic condition but could offer no remedy. Acquiring literacy not only created in him an awareness of his wretched condition but it was also instrumental in enabling him contribute to anti-slavery campaigns later in his life. For Douglass, learning to read and write came as a sheer chance for, as he was later to learn, the master did not approve giving instruction to slaves citing that it was "unsafe" and "unlawful" to do so (Douglass, 1845:29). The master, Mr. Auld, had sternly forbade his wife to teach "a nigger" anything other than to know how to do their master's bidding. For Mr. Auld, teaching a slave to read and write would render them unfit slaves for they would become unmanageable, of less value to their masters, and above all; literacy would make the slaves "discontented and unhappy" in their servitude.

Douglass confesses that hearing his master's words provoked deep feelings within him that he never knew existed. It opened his eyes to the Whiteman's real source of power to enslave the black man. It lay in their ability to deprive the enslaved of their right to formal education. Many blacks were able to bear witness to the dehumanizing character of slavery because they had once been exposed to the world of literacy. In the introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the reader is made to realize that the author, Harriet Ann Brent Jacobs, had been taught how to read by her owner, Margaret

Horniblow. As a slave girl, Harriet was able to stave off Dr. Flint's sexual advances because of the pure morals her grandmother had instilled in her. Her master, Dr. Flint, in a bid to have his way with her, tried to corrupt those principles by filling her "young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of" (Jacobs, 1861:30).

Such was the kind of education the female slaves were supposed to be raised: that which made them subservient and accommodating to the lascivious desires of their masters.

It is clear from the above discussion that educating the slaves necessarily improved their human capacities. It enhanced their agency, introspection and decisiveness which in turn enhanced their humanity. It is quite conceivable why several slaveholders like Schoolteacher would want to deny the slaves education and agency: it enhanced their humanity and opened their eyes to the reality of their wretchedness. In *Beloved* one can see that the Schoolteacher faces difficulties trying to treat the Sweet Home slaves as children because the former slaveholder, Mr. Garner, had "raised them into men" (Morrison, 1987: 421). He had allowed them to carry guns and respected their opinions. They regard themselves as men, which is indeed a rare title for enslaved males. Even Sethe, the slave girl, is allowed the privilege of choosing her husband. Their world seems to cave in when the Schoolteacher starts treating them as subhuman creatures. His attempt at re-educating the slaves to accept the dehumanized status fails largely because Mr Garner had brought them up as rational human beings. The impasse that the Schoolteacher faces here, therefore, can be seen as his failure to instil or enforce powerlessness among his slaves.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) offers a good demonstration on how the impulse to obliterate slave's agency overrode even the economic gains it obviously generated. George Harris, the slave, is described in the text as a young man of unprecedented ingenuity and adroitness. He had been hired out by his master to work in a bagging factory and while working there, he invents a machine for cleaning hemp. In addition, Harris displays exemplary character that endears him to many in the factory winning him the position of being the favourite. Despite his superior qualifications, however, he is "subject to the control of a vulgar, narrow-minded tyrannical master" (Stowe, 1852:11). When his master visits the factory, hears all about George's intellectual exploits and sees how manly, articulate and transformed he has become; he feels an "uneasy consciousness of inferiority". Despite the plea from the factory owner and his promise to increase the compensation, the man takes his slave back and put him to "hoeing" and "digging". That marks the beginning of George's suffering as his master takes every opportunity to humiliate him and puts him to the "meanest drudgery" of the farm. George is so much affected by his current situation that at one moment he confides in his wife that he wishes he was dead.

The text shows that Harris, the slave, had indeed surpassed his master in management, reading, writing and evidently, creativity. Considered from the perspective of the slaveholders, this was intolerable for it posed a threat to their sense of self. It amounted to a tacit challenge to the authority conferred upon them by the law. Thus for them, clipping the slaves' wings sometimes took precedence over the financial gains the slaves might generate for them. Depriving the slaves of their agency and education as seen in the examples offered so far, was meant to render them inert and therefore liable to dehumanization on account of their intellectual incompetence.

This would then clear the way for the slaveholders to be the unchallenged epitome of intellect and rationality. Thus, to maintain the inherent hierarchies slaves were denied a very worthwhile resource – education – that could open them up to the wide world of humanity and prosperity.

Denial of education and agency is considered the worst form of oppression as it can cause people to oppress themselves and others (Freire, 1921). The people who find themselves in this condition do not recognize their oppression because they have been so much indoctrinated that they find nothing wrong with their lives. The best example that illustrates this condition is in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave written by Himself* (1845). In the text, Douglass is perturbed by the exuberant mood Colonel Lloyd's slaves would exude as they went for their monthly allowance in the Great House Farm. They would make the nearby dense woods reverberate with their wild songs which, in Douglass' view, informed of the "horrible character of slavery" (11). The nature of excitement portrayed by these slaves could only be seen as belonging to people who are contented with their wretched conditions and find fulfillment in their powerlessness.

### 3.4 Denial of history and family lineage

In an attempt to show the ephemeral nature of the black history, Baldwin (1955) says that any black American wishing to trace his roots will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale that served as the entrance paper for his ancestor. Baldwin's observation confirms that the activities of slave traders and slaveholders certainly de-Africanized the future generations of the enslaved blacks by severing all the links to their roots in Africa. Furthermore, withholding of education from the blacks during the era of slavery hampered the writing and transmission of historical knowledge to the next generations. This significantly contributed to the loss of a substantial chunk of their history.

Kelman (1973) notes that when one is perceived as fully human, he is accorded identity and community. The slave practice not only ripped black people from their communities, history and cultures in Africa; but it also hampered the development of strong kinship, culture and sense of community among the slaves in the New world. The inhumane practice of sundering slave families through arbitrary sale of family members not only caused untold anguish to the family members, but it also inhibited the transmission of historical memory from one generation to the next.

According to Mondal (2013), part of Morrison's agenda in *Beloved* is to recuperate a history that had been lost to the ravages of enforced silences and willed oblivion. This is because history is also a crucial component of human identity. In the text, we are also made aware of the means contrived and employed by the white-dominated discourse to deprive the enslaved black population of their usable past. *Beloved* cites several instances in which black families were destroyed because a parent, a child or a sibling was sold by the slave holder. The same slaveholders also reserved rights to give names to their slaves. Naming naturally should be the exclusive right of a parent. It was one of the most convenient ways available for slaves to trace a relative. Baby Suggs provides a perfect example. She had been named Jenny Whitlow by her former master in Carolina. She however chose Baby Suggs claiming that her husband had given it to her. She believed that if she escaped from the slavery in future, her husband would be able to find her if she kept the name. But in



the world of chattel slavery, slaves could not claim exclusive rights to name their children or to keep their names indefinitely. In the eye of the law, as Stowe (1852) notes, slaves were not humans; they were a property of their masters. Paul D, for instance could not remember his mother, and had never met his father. Their past was totally severed from them the moment his brothers and he were sold to Mr. Garner who "kept them, forbidden to leave the farm, for twenty years" (Morrison, 1987:418). Through Paul D Garner's memories, we clearly see the necessity of family in transmission of communal history. He fondly remembers four black families in Maryland who had been living together for a century. He confesses that he watched them with awe and envy as he heard them "identify over and over who each was, what relation, who, in fact, belonged to who" (1987:418). Being able to live together for such a long time enabled these black families to not only preserve their historical memory but also transmit it to the next generations.

When Baby Suggs was separated from her seven children, she ceased to know how they were faring wherever they had been sold to. Her children too would never get an opportunity to bond with her and possibly learn about their roots from her. The only valid points of contact and sources of history for separated families were ultimately their white slave owners. Slave owners, being the main architects of separation, would naturally be reluctant to divulge any information about a relative. Frederick Douglass, himself a former slave, explains that not knowing his birthday was his greatest cause of unhappiness even during his childhood. He confesses that he does not remember meeting any slave who knew his birthday. The issue of the age was a serious challenge facing many slaves as Douglass (1845:19) seeks to address below:

"By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant."

It would appear that keeping enslaved blacks ignorant in matters concerning their birth days and descend was an elaborate plan to keep them attached to their masters. Douglass confesses that he never got to verify who his biological father really was. Regarding his mother, he confirms that he saw her only four or five times in his life, only at night. During the few times they met, she was not able to intimate to him who his father was. She died without ever revealing this vital information to her son. Thus Douglass, like many other slaves, could not trace his lineage.

Morrison (1987) describes Sethe as a person whose brain was not interested in the future but only hungry with the past. Her revenant daughter, Beloved, also kept bugging her with many questions about her unknown past. She wanted to learn more about her missing history as her life had been cut short by her mother. Beloved represents many generations of black people who were disconnected from their usable past by slavery. Beloved and Sethe in this context represent one inescapable reality: the future cannot be fully achieved until the past is conquered. Not being able to access their past thus portended serious challenges to black American identity.

### 3.5 Denial of love and familial relationships

The impulse to dehumanise the slaves as "anomalies of humankind" (Farshid, 2012), and the demand for their labour in the New World apparently took precedence over the welfare of the slaves. Even their social needs and feelings were not given much consideration because social life was a preserve of

the Whites. Chattel slavery literally forbade the development of intimate parental or spousal relationships.

In *Beloved* Garner has been depicted as the only slave owner who was humane enough to allow his slaves the rare opportunity of choosing their marriage partners. But before finding partners, which perhaps could be partly attributed to their restrictions and demanding tasks on the farm, the men were supposed to exercise a lot of restraint and live up to their title as Sweet home men. Most men, however, desired the intimate relationship with the only nubile girl Sethe and were always "dreaming of rape". Because of the need to exercise extreme restraint, they often indulged in acts of bestiality in order to satisfy their erotic desires; this again dehumanized them and challenged the validity and integrity of the 'Sweet Home men' tag on them (Morrison, 1987:19).

When Sethe eventually intimated to Lillian Garner that she wanted to marry Halle Suggs, the mistress thought she was already pregnant. But Sethe was actually more excited at the prospect of a wedding ceremony than anything else. When she asked Mrs. Garner whether there would be a wedding, she seemed momentarily disoriented as she put down her cooking spoon and then laughing a little, touched Sethe on the head, saying, "You are one sweet child" (Morrison, 1987:53). After that, she did not comment further on Sethe's wedding. Mrs. Garner's reaction probably suggests that the girl's request was outright outlandish. She may have been very understanding to Sethe but, like other slave owners, she knew there were limits to any generosity extended to slaves.

Yet Sethe, not wishing to be *married* in the dress she worked in, decided to make herself a wedding dress using any fabric she could find. And she succeeded in making "the worst-looking gown" anyone could imagine (Morrison, 1987:117). Sethe believed her pride and tender age at the time of her wedding was the main reason she did not see how ridiculous she looked in her wedding dress. Seeing how unhappy she was, her mistress, Lillian Garner gave her crystal earrings. But she did not put on the earrings until when she had gained her freedom from the slavery. Several years later while talking to Beloved, Sethe would reveal that she never actually had any wedding but she saw "Mrs. Garner's wedding gown in the press, and heard her go on about what it was like" (Morrison, 1987:116).

Sixo, another Sweet Home *man*, had a girlfriend called Patsy, a slave girl who lived seventeen miles away. His desire to be with her made him walk on foot every weekend to spend few hours with her before starting another trip back to the farm. The thirty-four mile walk would physically drain him such that when he arrived he would sleep "through dinner like a corpse" (Morrison, 1987:44).

The slaves' experiences as portrayed in *Beloved* are indicative of how much they yearned for the very rights they were being unjustly denied by the system. Most slave owners were not at all concerned about the slaves' love and family needs; their servile duties overrode anything else. The kind gesture demonstrated by the Garners towards their slaves, though it had limitations, should therefore be seen as a daring act. When viewed from the perspective of Schoolteacher, Mr. Whitlow and other inhumane slaveholders depicted in the text, Garner's actions amounted to spoiling slaves and "there's laws against what he done" (Morrison, 1987:432). Schoolteacher, and evidently Whitlow, had a different philosophy about slaves: they were breeders who should be mated to produce more picaninnies to enrich the farm.

Baby Suggs' experience as Mr. Whitlow's slave certainly attests to the fact that love life was never a slave's right. Slaves were required to have as many children as possible but not to have "pleasurable feelings on their own" (1987:402). So Mr. Whitlow used to send studs with orders to sleep with Baby Suggs and she was obliged to follow those orders. As a result she had eight children with different men and this attracted so much derision and stigma from both white people and coloured people.

After all the humiliation she had to go through, still seven of her children were sold off by her master. She was able to keep only one, Halle, but still lost him much later to insanity.

Withholding love and familial relationships from slaves had serious psychological repercussions on them. Some of these include development of irrational love for the loved ones and severe distress that nearly drove the affected slaves crazy. A classic example of how the separation of slave family members caused untold distress is depicted by a story by Jacobs. Jacobs (1861) narrates a disheartening story of a woman who escorted her seven children to the auction block. She expected that only *some* of them would be sold off but they took *all*. The mother was bought by another person. She tried to beseech the trader who bought her children to tell her where he intended to take them but he refused. The woman was left alone anguished and bereft of will to continue living. The narrator remarks that she once met that woman in the street and "her wild, haggard face lives to-day" in her mind (Jacobs, 1861:56).

Sethe's obsession with her four children apparently was related to the mother's love she was denied as a baby. Her mother had to work in the rice field so she was left under the custody of Nan who had to breastfeed her after first breastfeeding the white babies. She never received any nursing from her own mother. An in-depth scrutiny of the text reveals that Sethe considers 'nursing milk' the ultimate love a mother can have for her children. Thus when she confesses that "there was no nursing milk to call my own" she implies that she missed the maternal love.

When the Schoolteacher's nephews handled Sethe like a cow behind the stables and took her milk, she was greatly distressed because in her view, history was being re-enacted: the whites were taking the milk she reserved for her children in the same manner the nursing milk meant for her as a baby had been taken. This action traumatized her so much that eighteen years later, while Paul D was expressing his shock at the way her back had been savagely whipped, Sethe kept repeating "and they took my milk!" (Morrison, 1987:33).

The dehumanizing experience Sethe went through in the hands of Schoolteacher and his nephews without a doubt affected normative relationship between her and her loved ones resulting in destructive love: the "thick love". But Sethe vigorously defended the abnormal love she had for her children saying that love is either "thick" or else it is not love at all. The strong maternal love, and the desire to stop the Schoolteacher and his posse from taking her and her children back to slavery, drove her to attempt to kill all her four children but succeeded in killing only one. This tragic event is a testimony to the fact that deprivation of love and familial relationship had devastating psychological effects on the slaves.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that the dominant group of slaveholders used all means at their disposal to manage and maintain slaves for their economic

benefits. The methods employed were no less inhumane than they were degrading. From a humanistic point of view, slavery was one of the worst occurrences of human history. This is the situation that some fiction writers have attempted to re-enact in their works. As already seen, Morrison's *Beloved* makes a strong case in depicting the ills of slavery.

A close reading of fiction and nonfiction works of slavery can provide a reader with an opportunity for in-depth exploration into the cognitive framework that made the degrading treatment of Africans intelligible in the world where human dignity was esteemed. It was found that conceiving certain groups of people as being less than an average human in intellect, countenance and evolution provided moral approbation for their inhumane treatment.

Consequently, whipping, burning, maiming, imprisonment, starvation, humiliation and hanging were some of the methods of punishment devised and effectively used against slaves to instill fear, compliance to masters' code and acceptance of the dehumanized status. These "seasoning" methods were not always effective. Slaves developed fragmented personalities, became insane or opted to die. Those who successfully adopted slave mentalities, as Morrison (1987) and Douglass (1845) observe, died spiritually. This soulless, zombie-like existence was perhaps that which the institution of slavery desired to achieve from the enslaved people. People in that kind of situation are incapable of perceiving the oppression they are subjected to. With time, the dominant Europeans succeeded in maintaining their position against the subordinate African slaves. This socio-economic status was designed to help foster the Europeans' economic status. In managing to make the African slave accept his less than human status, the European slaveholders had in mind the insurmountable economic benefits that would accrue from such a position. Indeed as seen from the analysis, the relationship between the European slaveholders and the African slaves can be clearly explained by the social dominance theory.

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