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Being a Woman in the American Slavery System: A Study of Theslave Woman's Ordeal in America, from 1776 to 1865

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The present research work reveals and analyses the experiences and contributions of slave women in the global American slavery system. As such, the focus is on themes that especially concern female slaves; these include: motherhood, companionship, marriage, work on plantations, and punishment. Central in this study is how those female Blacks experienced slavery in America and how they help build the American economy in that period.

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BEINGAWOMANINTHEAMERICANSLAVERYSYSTEMASTUDYOFTHESLAVEWOMANSORDEALINAMERICAFROM1776TO1865

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The literary theory applied to the present research is Feminist or Gender Criticism; this is concerned with the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. It is also concerns the role of women in the literary work; the representations of women, the power structures between men and women. On this basis, the assumption is that while "biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender, masculine or feminine" (Lois Tyson, Critical Theory Today, Pge 53).

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Introduction

Slavery in America was mainly characterized by the over-working of millions of Blacks deported from the West African coasts. In most of the seventeenth and part of the eighteenth century, male slaves outnumbered female slaves, making the two groups' experiences in the colonies distinct. Living and working under various circumstances and regions, African-American women and men faced diverse situations of enslavement. The particular experience of women in the slave trade is especially important. As a minority of the total number of, women's experience in slavery and the slave trade has been disregarded. At best, historians have assumed that the generic term "slave" encompassed both men and women. However, the particular experiences of African women and their female descendants had clear consequences upon the experience of enslavement, both for themselves and for their male counterparts. Women's access to particular components of their African society's culture, their agricultural work, and their sexual and reproductive identities are just three of the elements that we must look towards to fully assess their role in the American slavery. Many European observers of the west and west-central Africa commented upon the industry of African women. They saw them as constant workers, some even characterizing these women as drudges. These observations are critical windows into the lives of African women before to and during the disruption caused by the trans- Atlantic slave trade.

The current research work is aiming to shed light upon the roles of slave women during the slavery era, those roles which people have rarely b taught in history courses but which some of these heroines reveal through an account of their lives in slave narratives and which some contemporary scholars also latterly tackled in their research works.

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1. Female Slaves' Experiences as Woman and as Mother

1.1. *The slave woman and womanhood*

From Africa to America, the role of the black enslaved woman had been debased. While in Africa, the passage from girl into womanhood was a symbol of entering a respectful category of community, in slavery it was rather celebrated as a source of economic income for the master, who then would acquire new slaves for his labor, free of charge. This conception made most slave women to become mothers as early as possible, around nineteen years old and then every two years, to the benefit of the masters. This practice, tacitly encouraged by the master, brought little benefit to the slave woman, except for the pride of being a mother and the consolation of having companions for the household chores; also being fertile for the slave woman seemed a guarantee for having a stable household, and avoiding being sold. But the prize to pay was to be forced into sexual relationship with a male slave, and to witness the same scourge with her daughters, in case she got some.

The physical exposition of the slaves' body during their transportation to America and during the sale process, coupled with the idea that the black women was a hypersexual being, exposed the slave woman to her white master, both as an object of abhorrence and that of fantasy. Since the slave was a personal property, the owner took this as full right to dispose of her willingly, and sometimes, female slaves would see through such relationships chances that they or their children, mulatoes, would be liberated by the master. Yet, on occasions, the white master did not hesitate raping slave women who are married, since her status as a married woman did not mean anything except that she remained a slave, then a possession belonging to the master. And the fact that the master have full control over the slave couple, left little power to the man over her wife. The case was even more critical when the slave man came from a neighbor compound. This made the slaves' matrilineal system to fully rely on the woman: definitely, the slave woman had no children; all the children belonged to the woman, then to the master.

Whenever possible, black slave women manipulated their unique circumstances in the struggle for their personal dignity and that of their families. As often as black men, black women rebelled against the inhumanities of slave owners. Like their ancestors and counterparts in Africa, most slave women took their motherhood seriously. They put their responsibilities for their children before their own safety and freedom, provided for children not their own, and gave love even to those babies born from violence. Contrarily to the slave man who would frequently plan escaping, the slave woman, in view of her physical weakness of being a woman coupled with her care for her children, would think that womanhood and personhood were easier gained within the slave community.

1.2. *The slave woman and motherhood*

Being a mother simply means having children to care for and to feed, although the care and education of children go far beyond a single woman's duties. Motherhood in the slavery system basically meant increasing the master's wealth. But this conception did not stop the slave women from producing children that they know, automatically would fall into that institution of slavery. One would have expected the slave woman, who did not just accept her condition as slave, to fight the system by refusing to contribute with more slaves to the master. But on the contrary, the slave woman could not forget the importance of motherhood as it existed in her mother land, Africa. In African tribes, a woman with no child sees herself excluded from the society; to put it clearly, men in traditional Africa get married first for children. The slave woman then had this as a fact, and since it brought a benefit to the master too, it became difficult to dissociate the slave woman from the concept of motherhood.

Slave motherhood occupied a central role in the American slavery system. Slave owners addressed it from the early 1780s onwards in response to demographic changes and abolitionist pressure to end the slave trade. Estimates show that "without slave imports from Africa, the African slave population would naturally have declined by some two percent per year in the 1770s and 1780s". (James Walvin, *A Jamaican Plantation: The History of Worthy Park*, New York: W. H. Allen, 1970, P.129.)

Slave women had to provide sufficient healthy laborers for the future free society and had to ensure that they were instructed in some correct moral behavior. It was the latter role of slave mothers as 'moral regenerators' that abolitionists addressed in their writings. Only a few abolitionists overtly tackled the issue of the slave owners' conception of slave women's childbirth practices. As a result of the role that they had allocated to slave mothers in their project of free slaves, they concentrated far more upon slave women's nursing practices. The slave owners stipulated that a mother's main task was to ensure the physical survival of her children. Also, she had to make sure that the children were emotionally content and received thorough moral training. All this occurred against a background of a rapidly increasing population.

Yet, globally, there was little motive for a slave woman to celebrate her first and other pregnancies; they knew that the master would let them devote very little time for breeding their baby, since motherhood did not accord them any leave form farm and other tasks. Many slave women died soon after delivery, either because of lack of medical assistance, or due to exhaust from both

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delivery and immediate hard work. "Negro women were too valuable in the field to be allowed much time to care for their children. A month or so after the birth of a child, the mother returned to her task. Thereafter the child was cared for during the day by the plantation nurse, who was generally a woman too old for work". (Charles Sackett Sydnor, *Life of Slave*, Mississippi: Mississippi University Press, 1933, P. 180-181).

However, there were special female slaves used for breeding, and these kinds of slaves were treated better than other female slaves. They also had the advantage of working less, while benefitting from better food opportunities. For such breeding slave women, it was expected that they give birth to the maximum of children until they were too worn out to have more children, or until they died in childbirth. Josephine Howell, a slave from Brinkley, recalled: "grandmother was a cook and a breeding woman, they prized her high, he had twenty-one children". (Josephine Howell, *Born in Slavery*, Arkansas: Federal Writers' Project, 1938 P. 139.).

2. The Female Slave's Plight

2.1. *Enslaved women role as wet nurses*

Wet-nursing is nothing but a typical form of gender exploitation; in the case of the enslaved black females, it represented both physical and sexual exploitation. White women who had breast milk difficulty or insufficiency, or who simply decided not to nourish their newly born babies because of personal conveniences, would resort to their nursing female slaves. The fact of breastfeeding one's own baby and another woman's child simultaneously, is not different from laboring and more typically, this would not be possible unless the breast feeder woman also has just given birth. In this way, wet-nursing appears as an additional burden to the slave woman. The evocative image of an enslaved wet nurse, carefully holding a white child to her breast in order to provide sustenance through her own milk, therefore holds much resonance for historians interested in gender, slavery, and relationships between black and white women in the antebellum South. "Wet-nursing bound women together across the racial divide, and white women also sometimes wet-nursed enslaved infants. Yet ultimately, white women used wet-nursing as a tool to manipulate enslaved women's motherhood for slaveholders' own ends. (Charles Sackett S ydnor, *Life of Slave*, Mississippi: Mississippi University Press, 1933, P. 180-181).

There have been many different forms of wet-nursing in the past, involving highly complex social relations. Patterns of wet-nursing thus vary within different historical contexts; and while at times the practice might have involved acts of altruism by women who shared their milk, at other times, for example under antebellum slavery, wet-nursing took on a more exploitative angle. Wet-nursing fostered both physical closeness and racial distance between enslaved and white women, and opportunities for resistance on the part of enslaved wet nurses remained severely limited. Conversely, slaveholding women's relative power granted them choices about whether to use a wet nurse. Occasionally (and for a variety of reasons) white women wet-nursed enslaved infants, enslaved women too shared their breast milk with each other in an example of more communal mothering processes. Slaveholding men and women manipulated enslaved women's mothering through their physical labor, their reproductive abilities, and the appropriation of their breast milk."Wet-nursing is a complex process that has commonly involved women in unequal power relationships in a variety of different regimes whereby wealthier women use women from lower down the social scale as wet nurses". (Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present*, New York: Edinburgh, 1988, P.33).The wet-nursing system migrated to Europe, and included both slave woman and some white women who found in it, a new form of business. Philip Fithian, a tutor in Robert Carter's Virginia household, wrote in his diary, "I find it is common here for people of Fortune to have their young Children suckled by the Negroes!" (Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian*, Virginia: Farished, 1774, P.7).The wet-nursing business became profitable for white slave masters who frequently hired their slave women to other white families in the need of breast-feeders. Paying for the services of a wet nurse was unnecessary when one could be procured for free from one's own chattel. "European colonial travelers to West Africa frequently commented on black women's breasts as large and droopy and compared them to goats' udders".(Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* Chapel Hill, 2004, P. 63.).

According to Jennifer L. Morgan, early European travelers typically commented that West African women's breasts were long, enabling women to suckle their infants over their shoulders. Referring to these black African women's breasts as dugges, an archaic word that meant either a woman's breast or an animal's teat, also "connoted a brute animality." Morgan also shows how representations of West African women led into later erotic images of enslaved wet nurses, in order for slaveholders to rationalize both the sexual exploitation of enslaved women and the care they provided to white offspring. "Ultimately, travelers' beliefs in black women's easy breast-feeding and childbirth laid the foundations for subsequent ideas about black African women's superior ability to perform hard manual labor". (Jennifer L. Morgan, Laboring *Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*,

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Philadelphia: William and Mary Quarterly, 2004, P.33) These two assumptions led to an entrenched system of dual exploitation of enslaved women's bodies as both reproducers and as workers. So while in the United States as a whole, wet-nursing declined over the course of the nineteenth century, in the South wet-nursing remained important, encompassing the multiple forms of exploitation inflicted on enslaved women's bodies. Southerners only occasionally fed infant slaves with bottles. But the availability of lactating enslaved women reduced the demand for infant feeding bottles, which might risk a child's health anyway. Procuring a wet nurse from among the household's slaves, if such a woman was available, was a simpler option for slave-owning mothers. Bottles, though, were more willingly given to slave infants when their own mothers' milk was needed to feed white babies, whom whites inevitably prioritized over enslaved infants.

With reference to some researches mostly based mostly letters, diaries, and journals of literate white women**,** backed with the enquiries from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and their respondents' testimony, Sally G. concludes that "about one-fifth of white women relied on female domestic slaves for wet-nursing and that the practice of sharing breast milk across racial lines (including white women feeding slave babies) represented one way some southern mothers rose above racial prejudice". (Sally Garett, *Mothers' Sacred Duty*, California: McMillen, 1990, P.118).

In many instances, white women would force the slave women to abandon nourishing their own baby to take exclusive care of the white babies. The wet-nursing system, as such, appears as an evident manipulation practice imposed on the slave woman; it likewise placed the white baby as far superior to the black baby, ss was already the hierarchy between Blacks and Whites. But the positive fact is that the wet-nursing system brought a close link and dependence between the white woman and the slave woman. Most slave masters then found in their slave women, more profitability than it appeared from the start, and the latter also found themselves on a more privileged position. Yet, these material benefits did not take those black women from their natural condition as slaves: nothing changed in their daily duties, in the household and in the plantation, and they were not safe from according punishments either**.** Even when nursing their own babies and the white women's, the slave women would go to the field for physically hard activities, and they never would claim this situation to change. "Enslaved women broadly rejected the notion that to labor in the big house was better than working in the field" (Eddy West, *Chains of Love*, Santa Barbara: Alford Ed, 2002, P. 84). One consequence of the wet-nursing system onto the enslaved women is emotional trauma as, contrarily to the white women, the slave woman had little ability and choice about their babies' feeding patterns, since they had to feed the white women's babies while taking care of their own child. The fact that white women scarcely complained about their wet nurses set little resistance of the latter in the process.

Slave women also benefited from the wet-nursing system; on the American Southwest plantation, some master would send female slaves' babies to be wet-nourished, while their mothers are busy working. This illustrates the degree of exploitation the white masters imposed on their female slaves, as both reproducers and workers. Most enslaved women who had babies, had limited contact with their babies during the working days because masters needed enslaved women as laborers to maximize his profits.

2.2. *Enslaved women's Companionship*

Colonialists realized that natural increase required more than material incentives to breed and an amelioration of the condition of pregnant and nursing slave women. Many believed that a church-sanctioned marriage or at least faithful cohabitation would raise the levels of fertility.

From the 1780s onwards, slaves were encouraged to live in stable and monogamous unions. Vivid accounts of slave debauchery supported these, which contended that decreases in the slave population should not be imputed to the planters' improper exercise of power. The focus in these accounts was on slave women's sexual practices. They argued that their trade-in sexual favors with slave men and white men not only made them contract diseases that made them infertile but also led them to abort their offspring as children restricted this profitable trade. Despite this widely held view and the various proposals to contain what was regarded as dangerous sexuality, such as offering slave women a reward upon marriage and flogging married slave women who had sex with white men, slave owners did little to remedy the problem of slave women's sexuality and hence facilitate natural increase. There is a contradiction between slave owners' rhetoric and practice. In this way, the masters frequently raped and forced the female slaves to breed with the male slaves.

Due to family splitting up occasioned by auctions, wives were separated from their husbands and giving as a companion to another man. Unmarried young girls were also married to slaves and obliged to get pregnant. The most beautiful of them or those filling some specific criteria in the eyes of the white men were chosen by masters to satisfy their libido. They give others like reward to overseers or as a gift on special occasion to another slave owner. Slave women could not choose by their own companion. When a female slave was not quite lucky to have a slave man as lover, or even dare to have a relationship with a person not chosen by the master, found themselves scourged severely or simply sold away.

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2.3. *Enslaved women considered as sexual objects*

Slave women's sexuality has occupied a central role in studies on Caribbean slave women. Until the late 1980s, the focus was on slave women's experiences of sexual oppression. By concentrating upon interracial sexual relations, various scholars tried to dispel the myth that slave women indulged in promiscuous and casual unions. Since then, attempts have been made to examine the meanings attached to slave women's sexuality. As the former slave Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* put:

> The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will.
>
> (Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Boston:* Thayer and Eldridge, 1861, P.54).

Jacobs' account of the sexual violence endured by slave women is merely one of many. Although it is impossible to know exactly how many black women were sexually assaulted under slavery, such abuse was widespread.

Sexual abuse was among the cruel attitude of some slave masters and any other white males who disposed of power over the female slaves; those female slave had no choice other than surrendering for the masters' sexual advances, and when pregnancy occurred, this would engender the rage of a master's wife, who would in most cases manage to have the slave woman sent away from her compound. "Masters forcibly paired *good breeders* to produce strong children they could sell at a high price. Resistance brought severe punishment, often death. I know these facts will seem too awful to relate, but it is truth", said former slave William J. Anderson in his 1857 narrative, *The real dark deeds of American Slavery*.

To justify their deeds, Colonialists used various arguments to construct slave women as a deviation from the ideal white society have of the good wife. First, they argued that slave women began sex at an early age. Secondly, they mentioned that they frequently changed partners. Thirdly, they expressed the opinion that the women preferred multiple partners. Planter and historian Bryan Edwards said for instance, in 1793 that slave women "would consider it as the greatest exertion of tyranny, and the cruelest of all hardships to be compelled to confine themselves to a single connection with the other sex".(Bryan. Edwards, *The History Civil, and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies,* 2 vols.).

The argument, however, that lent most support to the construction of slave women as sexually subversive was that they took readily to the prostitution of their bodies. For instance, the main character in the novel Marly was surprised at the readiness with which slave women offered themselves or even their daughters to white estate officers:

> He was incessantly importuned by the Pickeniny mothers, to take a wife, and there was not an individual among them, who had not someone of their young female friends to recommend for that purpose. Such recommendations were perpetually sounded in his ears. "Why mass Manly, not take him one wife, like older buckra? Dere is him little Daphne, would make him one good wife – dere is him young Diana - dere is him little Venus". In addition, to which much coquetry among the young damsels was displayed, and all their attractive qualities were shown for the same end.
>
> (Henry Moreton, *Marly: West India Customs,* Slave Trade Committee Report, 1862, P.65).

Many colonialists attributed slave women's deviation from the metropolitan ideal of female sexuality to their nature. Some did this indirectly by arguing, for instance, that exposure to the teachings of Nonconformist missionaries had not improved slave women's sexual behavior. Others did it more directly, like Jesse Foot, who referred to slave women's preference for multiple partners as a "natural passion", and Bryan Edwards, who thought that the women's sexual desire was nothing but a 'mere animal desire. The majority of the colonialists who did not represent slave women as naturally promiscuous attributed their lack of sexual purity to factors beyond the planters' control. The dominant image of slave women in the colonialist debate about slave women's sexuality was that of the immoral and evil temptress. They embedded this in accounts of interracial sexual relations. The short-term relations initiated by black and colored slave women to obtain material favors and of which white men were victims, were not the only interracial sexual relations. Many slave holders are in relations that were initiated by white men, had the consent of the slave women, and were relatively permanent. "The slave woman in question was usually the 'housekeeper'. Like the 'prostitute', they presented her as having an innate appetite for material, consumer goods. Most slave women desired to become a housekeeper and then the master's mistress so that they could order the manager to 'pamper and indulge' them like a 'goddess". (Henry Moreton, *Marly: West India Customs,* Slave Trade Committee Report, 1862, P. 65).

Distinguishing the violent sexual experiences of women of color from the term 'rape' illuminates the complexity of their oppression during slavery. Revealing how the law divorced women of color from the very possibility of claiming rape demonstrates not only that the state refused to protect those women from sexual violence, but also that the state refused to acknowledge its existence. The specific way that women of color were excluded from the category of people who could be raped meant both that their sexual lives were marked by extreme vulnerability and that their consent was

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fetishized in the sex trade. Sexual relationships between non-elite white men and black women were fairly frequent. However, the women of color who become the mistresses of the white men are neither rendered miserable nor degraded. It was not only bondswomen who were involved sexually with white men. Twenty-seven-year-old ship carpenter George Miller was closely associated with a free mulatto woman in whose house he died of fever in 1815, though it is not known if their relationship was casual or long term.

Discussion and Conclusion

Researches have revealed that about five of the fifteen million Blacks taken to America to be worked as slaves were women. More than their men, female slaves have had a three-fold burden: first the plantation and household hard condition labor, then the discrimination on them which was based not only on their skin color but also on their gender, and lastly, the sexual abuse their were facing from their masters. More than fifty percent of the enslaved women, from the age of fifteen, experienced sexual cases of abuse or rape. Initially, acquiring newly brought slaves from Africa was a preference of the slave masters, but with the end of the slave trade, all masters had a strong focus on their slave women's reproduction. This resulted in the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. They were forced to breed and then to perpetuate the slave exploitation to the next generation knowing that the slave child status follows that of the mother. To motivate them to do so, they were given extra allowance of food and commodities. These unhuman attitudes led to conflicts, giving the female slaves motives of resistance. Though they were severely punished equally to their male counterparts or sold away for any act of rebellion or non-submission, women resisted slavery in many different ways.

End Notes

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