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# Slave Trade and Dehumanization of Afro-American Women in Gyasi's Homegoing: A Black Feminist Study

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**Abstract:** *In this article, bell books' ground-breaking black feminist approach is adopted to examine the lingering impact of slave trade of Afro-American women in contemporary America. Slavery in the past stigmatized the present lives of Afro-American women. Even though slavery was abolished, the terrible effects of the slave trade continue to demean, degrade, and caricature black women in the western world of today. hooks' radical black feminist ideas reveal how racial discrimination and sexual orientation towards black women rob them of their social identity and place in white supremacist society. This research critiques all the forms of dehumanization black women experience in the white world starting with historical enslavement and ending in the present dehumanization. In the white media, theatre, music, literature, and other disciplines, black women are presented as sexy, bold, aggressive, hypersexual, angry, impatient, violent, macho, insensitive, incompetent, and lazy. The contemporary lives of Afro-American women are being plagued by the effects of the slave trade in the white world.*

**Key Words:** Slave Trade, Dehumanization, Lingering Impact, Afro-American Women

## Introduction

Afro-American women have experienced racial and sexual exploitation since the days of slavery. The 1960s saw a rise in awareness in the black feminist issues. Black women are particularly conscious of the effects of sexism, racism, and class injustice. Increased literacy among Black women in the 1970s inspired them to use writing and research as a platform to allow their voices to be heard. Black women sought out safe zones where they could openly express their worries about oppression and discrimination based on race, gender, or socioeconomic class owing to the hierarchical structure, or "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 1981). The convict lease system developed during the Reconstruction period (1863–1877), when slavery was abolished. This system allowed private owners to essentially purchase prisoners from state or local governments, which resulted in the unjust imprisonment of many African-American women. The concepts that

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would later serve as the backbone of Black feminism were set in motion during the post-slavery era by Black female activists and thinkers such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and Frances Harper, among others. These ladies created for black women the roles of public speaking, suffrage advocacy, and helping people in need following Reconstruction. Conflicts did, however, arise between White feminists, especially those who had participated in revolution, and early Black feminists.

Truth (1851) observes that white women are frequently considered as emotional and gentle, but black women face racist abuse. White writers, on the other hand, mostly ignored this, fearing that it would divert attention away from their aim of women's rights and instead focus on freedom of black women. Another writer Lloyd (2005) argues that Black women's "outsider within" notion was formed where Black women were seen as different from the supposed White elite who asserted power on them (pp. 61-69). As a result of White feminists' exclusion of Black women from their discourse, Black female writers addressed their own marginalized experiences and promoted Black consciousness in society. Afro-American women have been treated like objects since white colonization. They have been regarded as laborers, child breeders, black whores, farm workers, care taker, concubines and sexual objects during the period of enslavement. Davis (1983) recounts numerous accounts of Black women raped by their owners, husbands, or other male slaves. Ironically, it is also believed that Black women's sexual exploitation and abuse was because of their own immorality. Though slavery was abolished in 1865, discrimination over race and gender still haunts the lives of Afro-American women in contemporary America. They are still living in the prison of whites' unjust prejudice. Being Black women, they face discrimination in their social lives. No group in the United States has now had its identities so thoroughly institutionalized as African American women (hooks, 1981, p. 7). Being women and black, they are treated as of inferior status. During Reconstruction period, Black men occupied authoritative place while black women were commanded to play a more "subservient" character (hooks, 1981, p. 4).

Today Afro-American women, says Morton (1991), find their social, physical, political and intellectual capabilities being eclipsed in the white society. Objectification assigns inferior status and passive roles to social aliens and are, hence, "manipulated and controlled" (Collins, 1986). Prejudices of gender, race, class, colour and ethnicity dehumanize the subordinate group. Objectification compels a marginalized person to self-define. Afro-American women are being objectified on the basis of their race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation in the contemporary America.

The image of a black woman has been a disgrace to the white civilization, unable to contribute any good to the society. Philomena (1991) argues the othering of black women stereotypes and isolates them. Children who belong to marginalized community when repeatedly subjected to racist stereotyping begin to doubt their own ability, creativity, and identity, says Delgado (1995). Several Black Radical writers have raised issues like skin complexion and hair texture as basic identity markers constructed by the western world. Black women have different skin colors varying from light brown, dark brown to black and they wear braids, dreadlocks, corn rows on their straight or curly hair.

The image and dignity of black women, denigrated by white culture since slavery, were greatly restored by black female writers of Afro-American literature. Gyasi while visiting Ghana in 2009 was fascinated by the idea of some living in luxury on the upper floors while others struggled in the dungeons below, which served as the inspiration for her debut book, *Homegoing*. The novel traces the horrible slave trade in the past and its ongoing impact on the lives of Afro-American women in contemporary America.

## Literature Review

Slave trade has been a painful experience for Afro-American men and women. Slaves were considered property and were supervised by slave patrols to


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preserve social and economic security for white slave owners. The initial official organization of the police was the slave patrol, whose tasks included enforcing white rule over African-Americans. When slaves escaped, the patrol was authorized to chase them down and restore them to their masters. In order to prevent them from escaping, whites beat, maimed, and lynched them. Octave's Kindred (Butler, 1979) explores the traumatic experiences of slavery which Afro-American women faced in the past.

Dana is a black female protagonist who travels back in the times of slavery. Alice, a black woman in torn dress and in a miserable condition, is married to a black slave named Issac. Rufus, a white slave owner, has just raped her. He is fighting Rufus to punish him for this act. Dana's twentieth century belief that Alice's body is her own possession is a silly concept to Alice: "Not mine, Rufus'. He paid for it," says she (Butler, 1979, p.167). According to Govan (1986) the novel depicts the painful experiences of slave trade of Afro-American women, their sense of loss, severe punishment, resistance to oppression, hypocrisy of white religion and attempts to escape slavery, existence in the slave quarters has been the battle for education, and the hardship of "sexual abuse"(pp.12-11).

Force was thought to be a normal aspect of sex during the slavery and women were supposed to resist. Rape happened only when a white man tried to impose himself on a white woman and she stopped her struggle, eventually accusing him of rape. Rape of white woman by a white man was usually considered a crime, with sentencing ranged from ten to twenty years of imprisonment or death, while rape of black woman by a white man was normally not considered a crime. The white men's brutality is concealed as "sexual relations," "committed miscegenation," "seduced girls," or "patronized prostitutes", the terms that masks white men's violence against black enslaved women. During the era of slavery, sexual violence against enslaved African American women was not deemed as an act of inhumanity.

Slave trade in America and subsequent systemic discrimination led to racist white stereotypical notions about enslaved women's social role. White slave masters' negative beliefs rationalized their educational, socio-political, economic and religious institutes (Feagin & Feagin, 1999). Sethe, the black female enslaved protagonist of *Beloved*, fled from enslavement to Sweet Home, a slave plantation. Denver, her daughter, lives with her in the house. She is a kind mother prepared to go to any length to protect her children from the injustices she endured as a slave. She has "a tree on her back," scars from being lashed. Because of the hardship they endured as a result of white slavery, most enslaved African women attempted to erase the past memories resulting in split spirit and lost identity. Sethe and her daughter, Denver, had both abandoned their sense of individuality, which could only be reclaimed by integrating their origins and memories of former lives. Fulton (1997) believes that slave trade leads to "fragmented" personality. The identity made up of unpleasant memories and an unspoken past that is ignored and suppressed, becomes a "self that is no self".

Throughout slavery, Black women worked as breeders, and their offspring were worth a "newborn calf or colt." Enslaved women were frequently prohibited physical and emotional connection with their own children. Many of them rebelled against slavery's terrible conditions, joining their husbands in slave revolts and fleeing to the north in search of freedom and a better life. Though slavery was abolished in 1865 in the United States, yet it is being practiced in America today. Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) depicts how slavery and dehumanization of Black women are passed on generation to generation as an unending phenomenon in America.

## Theoretical Framework

Black feminism claims that black women are just as capable and autonomous as white women. According to Collins (2009), Alice Walker initially used the idea of black devaluation in her "Womanism" theory, focused on the background and day-to-day lives of black women. The renowned "Ain't I a Woman?" speech by Sojourner Truth, made in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, serves as an example of Black women's battle to challenge their position under

repressive systems. hooks describe her struggle with neither "fear nor fantasy" to eradicate chauvinism, sexual extortion, and subjugation (hooks, 2000, p.8). To acquire equality and justice for Afro-American women, she foregrounded their devaluation, rape and dehumanization at the hands of sexism and racism in contemporary white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchal America. She states in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that being on the periphery means being a part of the system but out of the mainstream (hooks, 1990, p.16).

Black woman is still viewed as a threat to white civilization because blackness has always been associated with evil, lust and immorality. Even now, the Black woman's body is a terror that may easily be evoked in the white consciousness even where they are neighbours, co-workers, friends, relatives, lovers, and citizens. Racialization constructs the phobia of the Black woman's body. "Fear of the Black woman is embedded in Western society" (Tate, 2015, p.97). The slave trade of African-American men and women started in the 18th and 19th century with the arrival of white missionaries. White men became increasingly interested in African women. For slavers, black woman was very *useful* for hoe-agriculture, working long hours on the American plantation, simultaneously executing a variety of domestic activities. Slavers often captured the powerful women in the tribe such as the King's daughters in order to entice African men into easy capture and other African women were sold into slavery. White men were not afraid of black women and they did not feel the need to keep black women chained on slave ships. But black men were shackled to one another as they were a great threat. The white control of the black female slaves was absolute because they were easy victims. Black female slaves moving freely around the boards served an easy prey to white men who chose to physically harass and torture them. Every female slave on the ship was first burnt with a hot metal rod. Then an instrument named as "cat-o'-nine-tails" was used by the white men to whip those Africans who resisted the torture. They had been brutally raped and thrashed on every part of their bodies, says hooks (1981, p.18). In *Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood* (1992), Dorothy Roberts white slave masters victimized Africans through racial dehumanization and the manipulation of women's sexual and reproductive rights. The American justice system is based on this hideous mix of race and gender. The very first laws in the United States dealt with the status of children born to slave mothers and fathered by white men. The experiences of enslaved Black women in patriarchal America had been horribly inhuman. Black women were useful to their owners not just because of their labor, but also because of their capacity to produce new slaves. They grew their fortune by regulating their slaves' fertility, encouraging pregnancy, beating enslaved women who did not produce offspring, pressuring them to produce and sexually abusing them. Although African women "reproduced" for white male race, they reaped little benefits, says Dorothy Robert (1992, p.9). *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* mourns that that slavery resulted in devaluation of black womanhood that pervaded Americans' psyches and affected the social standing of black women even after slavery was abolished. To understand how black women are seen in American culture, one only has to watch American television twenty-four hours a day. The prevailing image is that of the "evil" woman, the harlot, the sinner, the prostitute.

Slavery's massive sexual abuse of black women has been critiqued but its effect on black women's political and social status in Contemporary America has been ignored. hooks resent that Susan Brown Miller's *Against Our Will* neglects the impact of slave trade on Afro-American women in contemporary America. Her focus is on the past oppression the black women had to face during slavery. hooks argues that Black women's rape was nothing but a "chance" act of brutality (1981, p.51).

The term "Black Feminism" refers to the study of racial and gender issues affecting black women. Rape has been a classical act where emotions like hatred, violation, contempt or desire to break personality take place. This mindset of shattering personality affects modern life. No force can eliminate rape if power and patriarchy prevail. Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1974) claim that rape cannot be "eliminated" and nothing can stop a

chauvinist system to grow and rape of African Americans will sustain (p.8).

## Analysis

### Slave Trade and Afro-American Women

Women were one-third of the approximate 15 million individuals forced from Africa as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Women who were imprisoned had a heavy responsibility. They were subjected to intense forms of racism and victimization as a consequence of their womanhood and skin color, in contrast to the brutal victims of forced employment as slaves. Slave owners first shifted focus towards the reproductive and sexual roles of black women. They would rather spend for fresh Black slaves than bear the burden of producing captive babies. Slave importation from Africa increased as the prohibition of the institution of slavery drew.

The population of slaves in the British Empire decreased after suppression of the Slave Trade Act was passed in 1807. Labour expectations on the enslaved communities increased. Slave owners began to grow the number of slaves through sexual violence to maximize productivity of forced labour at the cost their health, their cultural identities, values, family, and dignity. These practices resulted in confrontations and revolt.

Several castles were built along Ghana's coast between the 14th and 16th centuries for defense from other European traders. Slaves were imprisoned in these castles from the 1500s before being transferred to other states. Six million slaves are thought to have traveled the Middle Passage, but 10-15% never made it to their final place. These castles are now popular tourist destinations. Most enslaved Black women lost contact with not only their history and cultural values, but also with their family members because of the nature of slavery in America. Due to the possibility of dissatisfaction, slave owners regarded cultural beliefs, familial ties, use of local African language and literacy to be harmful for black women and hence promoted white cultural norms. Slave masters destroyed African identity not only through severe beatings, horseback patrolling, sexual assaults, and other means of violence, but also with the help of "the disavowal of African images, symbols, and rituals," says Francis Ngaboh-Smart (2007, p.167).

Gyasi (2020), covering the subject of African cultural history. adopts a wider perspective exploring the practice of slave trade and its eventual emancipation in both Africa and America over a time span of 250-years. The central themes are the sale of women, prohibition of education and cultural freedom and obstacles to the preservation of ancestral history and cultural norms. Slavery was the beginning of exploitation and injustice that African-Americans especially women faced at the hands of white society. Gyasi compares the slaving industry with Hell. The protagonist, Ness, a born slave, becomes the victim of slave trade. Ness' life in the first plantation is "[i]n Hell, the sun scorched cotton so hot [that] it almost burned the palms of your hands to touch it … The Devil was always watching" (p.74).

The institution of slavery was governed by "slave codes", the rules to ensure the master's authority and the slave's subordination. The black slave woman was treated as chattel under these regulations, a part of possession and a means of work that could have been purchased and sold like other animals. They were not allowed a stable marriage or privacy or even reading and writing. The owner rewarded the submissive slave with favors, while the disobedient slave was punished harshly. The plantation slaves were also segregated by a hierarchical order. The house workers were at the peak; the trained craftsmen were next and the great bulk of field workers, who suffered the consequences of the brutal plantation conditions, were at the lowest. Gyasi's rich imagery shows slavery tormenting as Hell on Earth under Devil, the slave master. Ironically, Europeans forced Christianity on Africans and their slaves, but instead of teaching what a true Christian ought to be, they reflected the merciless Devil and imposed their own Hell on their slaves: Ness is beaten until the whip snaps off her back like pulled taffy (p.81). "They were stripped of their clothing and beaten on all parts of their body", says hooks (1981, p.18). These beatings of Ness make her a victim of paranoia, distrust and hate.

Davies (2006) observes that Whipping was a regular practice on plantations to *regulate* the enslaved workers, and to assert the white superiority. The female protagonist Esi, the first victim of slavery, is the first carrier of the scars wrought on her body by her white slave masters' whippings. Esi, a sexual object for her masters, is a captive in a dungeon and "hundreds of women surround it" (p. 28). Esi physically torture by rape is intensified by her psychological scars of losing her independence, homeland, and family. When she realizes she wouldn't be able to return to her village, she divides her life into two parts: before and after becoming a slave. Before the castle she was the daughter of Big Man … Now she was dust (p. 31) in the system of white "masculine" power.

## Objectification of Black Bodies

The following seven aspects of objectification listed by Nussbaum (1995) are relevant to our understanding of the gender discrimination as faced by Esi in the dungeon, Middle Passage, and plantation. i- Instrumentality: using the other person as a mere tool in achieving your own goal; ii- Denial of Autonomy: considering the other person as if he or she lacks freedom and self-respect; iii- Inertness: acting as if the other person lacks power or the ability to act; iv- Fungibility: viewing somebody as comparable or replaceable with other people; v- Violability: treating the people as if they might be pierced or smashed; vi Ownership: considering the people someone's saleable property. Black enslaved women "gave love those babies born from violence", says Jennifer Hallam in *The Slave Experience: Men, Women and Gender* (p. 2). *Homegoing* is an expression of hideous practice of slave trade in the past and its lingering impact in the present. Effia and Esi, half-blood sisters, are sold into slavery by their families. Esi's painful life – horrible dungeons and the way enslaved women were piled one on top of the other hardly enduring brutal environment and humiliation is the true representation of what Afro-American women had to face in the past. Esi, who is still young, is inhumanly raped by a white man: "His foot at the base of her neck" (p. 30). Esi is reduced to a body which becomes a part of all the mud and waste that surrounds the floor. This depicts the brutality the black women suffered at the ugly hands of the white society. The white men feel no hesitation for abusing the enslaved women's bodies. Another white soldier terrorizes Esi and rapes her in his bedroom. After raping her, he is "horrified, disgusted with her ... her body was his shame" (p. 48). The inhumanity and blame of the abusers are put on the victims. Mistreatment and sexual reduce Esi to a commodity. The checking scene of black enslaved women is more horrible. Governor James, Effia's husband, examines black women's sexual organs without any shame and hesitation: "He ran his hands over their breasts and between their thighs" (p. 49). They feel ashamed and helpless to this disgusting act of the white soldiers who treat them as lifeless objects inside the dungeon.

They are raped because they are seen as sexual objects. The insensitivity of white men towards black women is explicit. The white soldier James chooses the slaves by touching their breasts and placed his hand between their legs. Despite that Esi is bleeding at the moment he touches her, he asks the soldiers to take her with them. In another incident of extreme brutality Eccoah feels humiliated upon being abused and mistreated by her husband. They are regarded essentially as "sexual commodities" to be exploited, then sold and earned from.

## Continued Devaluation through Language and Religion

The white civilization used Christianity as a lure to ensnare the minds and bodies of African-American women, making them an easy scapegoat. Gyasi paints Christianity as a vehicle of epistemic oppression on African women. The British exploited Christianity to mislead Ghanaians.. The white Christian society portrayed the spread of Christianity as a good deed for Africa. The English forced white Christianity on the African women for their own benefits. Abena, Akua's mother, flees her community when expecting with her daughter and resides with a bunch of Christian missionaries she encounters on a recent visit. A missionary murders her in order to get Abena baptized in a brutal episode. "She thrashed and thrashed and thrashed, and then she was still" (p.189).This horrible scene

exemplifies the missionary's cruel imposition of his faith on her. Ironically, he violates the principles of Christian faith: "Thou shall not kill," (Exodus 20). This demonstrates the missionaries' contradiction in their teachings and deeds, and the hollowness of their beliefs. The reality behind spreading Christianity is assimilation, not redemption. After murdering Abena, the white missionary set fire to her body and possessions. Then he prays to God to accept his forgiveness for this act. By using the word "forgiveness", the white people try to escape the guilt and punishment in the life hereafter. Even though they have inflicted a tormenting punishment on the Afro-American women but use this concept to absolve themselves of Hell in the eternal life. Abena passes away while Akua is quite young, and the missionaries bring up Akua. During her childhood, Akua is torn between two opposing religions: European Christianity and native Gold Coast religious practices, as expressed by a local fetish man who initially maligns the missionary's character. When Akua is six she overhears another youngster calling the missionary an obroni, a name she only understands to indicate "white man". The fetish man reveals that obroni comes from abro ni, which means "wicked man." And it appears that this girl is not the only one who considers the missionary a monster. He informs Akua that the missionary is a terrible damaging guy with a long history of abuse. Akua initially considers such discussion about a man of God to be disrespectful, but her views soon change. She recalls how the missionary grabs her hand and drags her out when she first visits the fetish man.

The missionary summons her to his office a few days later and starts her religious education. He begins his lecture, however, not with the Christian principles, but with the risk of physical punishment holding a switch close to her nose. He informs her that all of Africans including her and her mother are rebellious nonbelievers. Incapable of persuading people rationally, he compels her to accept his faith: "the Missionary looked [as if] he would devour her" (p.190). Indeed, brutality is the Missionary's only weapon. Akua declares her plan to get married to Asamoah, a local trader. He advises her to repent of her sins and then flips the switch on her.

The enforcement of English language is another weapon, suggests Gyasi. African American women were forced to speak and write in understandable English in Christian schools (Omolewa, 2006, p.275). Only a few African students, however, were ever permitted to master English. Esther in *Homegoing* feels terrified to see "the white book" which she has to speak with "the white tongue." (p.230). She does not speak her imperfect English because she fears that it will show her lack of education and financial status. The black women wanted to live their indigenous cultural values. The purpose of white schooling was cultural, physical and psychological oppression of black women. In May 2002, Ghana declared English as its official language of education infringing on their human rights linguistically, as Owo-Ewie (2006) demonstrates in *The Language Policy of Education in Ghana* (p.79). The acceptance of English by the Africans is the continuation of the assimilation into the white culture. Through the character of Esther, Gyasi depicts Africans' forced integration into pro-White American society at the expense of African-Americans. English curriculum served as an instrument to promote white cultural values and Eurocentric history.

## Conclusion

Gyasi has encompassed the battle of seven generations who suffer the loss of their home, cultural values, ancestry, and language. Gyasi, herself an African American, effectively highlights the impact of slave trade. She illustrates the transfer of the impact of slave trade from generation to generation. The novel depicts the horrible consequences of slavery under colonialism. Blackness was made synonymous with animalism. Esi's ancestors arrived in the United States as slaves. The black female characters' experiences were heart wrenching. Slavery required them to work 24 hours a day, making housekeeping impossible for women. Lighter-skinned black women were considered beautiful and were allowed to work in the slave master's home, where they would be responsible for household tasks. The next generations, who had gained liberty through abolition, were nonetheless underprivileged. When

these women started working, they were assigned occupations that fit the caretaker archetype, like cleaning. Black women, regarded as immoral and hypersexual, were portrayed as the initiators of sexual contacts. Gyasi views white missionaries as demonic and insensitive. The Englishmen forced Christian faith on the Africans in order to control them psychologically. They *used* the philosophy of forgiveness to purge themselves of their inhumanity for all the exploitation they ever caused to the African women.

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