

Chapitre 3/Chapter 3

Black Women's Relations to White and Black Men : A Heritage of Slavery in America

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American Slavery was a social and economic system which consisted of exploiting the labor of Africans. In the American colonies of Great Britain, it started in 1619, when a Dutch ship carrying 20 African servants landed at Jamestown in the Virginia colony.¹ It formally ended in the United States in 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment was proclaimed at the close of the Civil War, with the Northern victory over the South. For more than two centuries Africans had been kidnapped from their homelands and against their will were transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the "New World." This transfer of slaves from Africa to America was referred to as the "Middle Passage" because it constituted the middle part of what was known as the "Triangular Trade." From 1650 to 1860, it is estimated that about 10 to 15 million Africans had been conveyed to America in order to be used as unpaid workers in the homes of white families and on their plantations. Most of these Africans landed in South America and the Caribbean, but almost 500.000 of them were shipped to North America.² Those Africans, who were referred to as slaves, had no rights and were viewed as commodities or instruments of production. They came from a diversity of cultural origins since they were taken from different regions of West Africa, such as Senegal, Sierra Leone, Congo, Angola, etc

Africans were transported to America in overcrowded ships and under bad conditions. Richard Wright described the suffering of slaves on board those ships and its consequences :

*The trauma of leaving our African home, the suffering of the long middle passage, the thirst, the hunger, the horrors of slave ship – all these hollowed us out, numbed us, stripped us, and left us only psychological urges, the feeling of fear and fatigue.*³

Slaves suffered a lot on board those ships. They were chained together and crowded under the deck throughout the whole voyage, which typically lasted for more than one month. Most of the time, they did not have the right to move and, when the ships were without sanitation, slaves did their human needs where they were seated. A large number of them died in mid passage to America because they developed illnesses such as malaria, seasick, diarrhoea ect. Some preferred to commit suicide by diving into the Atlantic Ocean or staving to death because they did not want to be taken from their homeland.

Generally speaking, it is said that slave men and women had undergone the same suffering during that period of slavery. They had no rights, they couldn't refuse to work, they were almost not able to escape and, in addition to this, they were considered as chattel because they could be bought, sold, or rented by Whites.

But during that period of slavery, as we shall see, slave women underwent something which differentiated their suffering from that of Black men. In addition to the experiences

¹FRANKLIN John Hope, Alfred A. Moss JR. **From Slavery To Freedom, A History Of African Americans**, Seven Edition, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994, p.56

²These statistics are taken from **Slavery In America**, http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/geography/slave_trade.htm

³WRIGHT Richard, **Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History Of The Negro In The United States Of America**, With Photographs by Edwin Rosskan, Lindsay Durmmand Limited, London, 1947, p. 15

they shared with Black men, such as the constant degradation of being considered as no more than property because of their race and culture, slave women suffered sexual abuse. Many became the victims of sexual exploitation by their white masters.

This essay will focus on the ambiguous relationship between slave women and their white masters and its wider impact on the relations between black women and black men.

I/ White Male Behaviour toward Slave Women

One of the main justifications of slavery was that slaves were sinners, barbarians, savages, inferior people whose domination had been demanded by God. This justification of slavery is clearly explained in the following extract:

*The arguments were broadly these: that the Negro was a heathen and a barbarian, an outcast among the people of the earth, a descendant of Noah's son Ham, cursed by God himself and doomed to be a servant forever on account of an ancient sin.*⁴

Throughout the whole period of slavery, a relentless campaign was conducted to convince people and more particularly Africans of the inferiority of the Black race. In order to succeed, stereotypes were often used to name Africans. Indigenous people were often referred to as "brown apes" or "Hottentots"⁵ which is defined in the Oxford dictionary as a person of inferior intellect or culture. Because they were convinced of the superiority of their race, one of the main obsessions of Whites during this period was to protect the "purity" of their race. As a consequence, inter-marriages and sexual intercourse between the two races were forbidden. From the beginning of slavery, laws were passed by white men to prohibit the union of black men and white women. One of those laws stipulated that:

*...free white women would loose their freedom if they married a black slave and under which the children of white women and black men became slaves.*⁶

According to this law, white women lost their freedom and became slaves if they made love with a black man. It was a means of dissuading white women from having any relation with black men. Gunnar Myrdal discusses the effect of this law long after slavery was formally abolished:

*In practice, there is little inter-marriage even where it was not prohibited, since the social isolation from the white world that the white partner must undergo is generally intolerable even to those few white people who have enough social contact and who are unprejudiced enough to consider marriage with Negroes.*⁷

Because of this law which was only applied to white women, during that period of slavery, white women were inaccessible to black men, but white men could legally have sex with their slave women at will. Black women were victims of sexual abuse. They were used as sexual toys by males in the white master's family and those of managers as well. An illustration of this fact can be seen in the following description by the African American sociologist, Franklin Frazier, who recounts the rape of one slave woman:

⁴MYRDAL Gunnar with the assistance of STERNER Richard and ROSE Arnold , **An American Dilemma, The Negro Problem In Modern Democracy**, Harber & Row, Publisher, New York, 1944, p. 95

⁵ COLLINGWOOD – WHITTICK Sheila, Master 1 Culture Du Commonwealth' s Class

⁶ **African American History And Women,**

http://womenstory.about.com/od/afrawomentimeline/a/aaw1492_time.htm

⁷ MYRDAL Gunnar, *op. cit.* p. 606

Approximately a century and a quarter ago, a group of slaves were picking cotton on a plantation near where Troy, Alabama, is now located. Among them was a Negro Woman, who, despite her position as a slave, carried herself like a queen and was tall and stately. The over-seer (who was the plantation owner's son) sent her to the house on some errand. It was necessary to pass through a wooded pasture to reach the house and the over-seer intercepted her in the woods and forced her to put her head between the rails in an old stake and rider fence, and there in that position my great-great-grandfather was conceived.⁸

Several justifications had been given to those sexual assaults. In fact, raping black women was for whites a way of showing their superiority. Whites saw slave women not as human beings but as “female animals”. The act of rape was for the white rapist, on the one hand, a means of dehumanizing the slave woman's body, and, on the other hand, a way of showing black men their inferiority. The powerlessness of Black men to defend Black women served as an object lesson for all slaves. Rape was also a means of acquiring more slaves without buying them since, according to the law, the status of a child depended on that of his mother if the latter was black.⁹ In fact, mulatto children born out of those sexual assaults were rarely manumitted by their white fathers. They were usually considered as slaves.

Raping slave women was a practice which was very widespread in America. Both Southern and Northern masters resorted to it though it is said that slavery was less intense in the North than in the South. Slave women who tried to refuse the sexual advances of whiter men were victims of punishments. Frazier describes one instance where a white man beat a slave woman who had refused his overtures:

Thomas James, Jep's second son, had cast his eyes on a handsome young Negro girl, to whom he made dishonest overtures. She would not submit to him, and finding he could not overcome her, he swore he would be revenged. One night he called her out of the gin-house, and then bade me and two or three more, stripped her naked; which we did. He then made us throw her down on her face, in front of the door, and hold her whilst he flogged her – the brute – with the bullwhip, cutting great gashes of flesh out of her person, at every blow from five to six inches long. The poor unfortunate girl screamed most awfully all the time and writhed under our strong arms, rendering it necessary for us to use our united strength to hold her down. He flogged her for half an hour, until nearly killed her and then left her to crawl away to her cabin.¹⁰

Beating slave women was a way of extinguishing their resistance. It was also a way of reminding slaves that they were nothing more than the property of Whites.

Not all slave women resisted the advances of white men. There were many who accepted to have sex with their masters. These women submitted to the desires of their masters either because they wanted to avoid being punished or they hope to be emancipated or at least treated better by their owner.

During that era of American slavery, there are accounts of masters expressing deep affection for their slaves. This was seen a threat to the whole system of slavery because it could lead to the emancipation of slave women which meant a destruction of the barrier that

⁸FRAZIER E. Franklin, **The Negro Family In The United States, Revised And Abridged Edition**, The University of Chicago Press Edition, Ltd., London, 1966, p.53

⁹ **African American History And Women**,
http://womenstory.about.com/od/afamwomentimeline/a/aaw1492_time.htm

¹⁰ FRAZIER E. Franklin, *op. cit.* p. 54

had been constructed between masters and slaves or more exactly between Blacks and Whites. An illustration of this can be found on pages 63 – 64 of *The Negro Family In The United States* in which Frazier recounts the story of a Negro girl who succeeded in convincing her master, who was in love with her, to emancipate and marry her. Clearly, the slave woman's intimate relationship with her master created problems within the white family which was obsessed by a desire not to compromise the image of the family.

When slave women unwillingly or willingly had sexual inter-courses with their masters, they frequently faced the jealousy of their white mistresses. White women saw slave women as their rivals and use different methods to punish them for their "transgressions." White mistresses were often aware of what their husbands were doing with their slave women. The terror suffered by slave women has been described by the African American historian, Gerda Lerner:

*Pastey wept oftener, and suffered more than any of her companions... Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes ... because it had fallen her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. ... In the great house, for days together, there were high and angry words... where of she was the innocent cause. Nothing delighted the mistress so much as to see her suffer. ... Pastey walked under a cloud. If she uttered a word in opposition to her master's will the lash was resorted to at once, to bring her to subjection; if she was not watchful while about her cabin or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood, or a broken bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress' hand would smite her unexpectedly in her face. ... Pastey had no comfort of her life.*¹¹

A slave woman often underwent a double oppression when working inside the home of a white family: one from the white master who saw her as a sexual object, and the other from white mistresses who saw the relationship between the slave woman and her husband as an offence.

Jealous mistresses sometimes went so far as to demand that their husbands sell the slave women and their husbands' coloured offspring. But often white women tolerated their husbands' sexual transgressions with slave women and sometimes solicited help from Black women to keep their family together:

*This moral debasement is not at all times unknown to white women in these homes. I know of more than one coloured woman who was openly importuned by white women to become the mistresses of their white husbands, on the ground that they, the white wives, were afraid that, if their husbands did not associate with coloured women, they would certainly do so with outside white women, and the white wives, for reasons which ought to be perfectly obvious, preferred to have their husbands straight.*¹²

These white women preferred to have a black rival because they felt superior to slave women and were sure that their husbands would never leave them for a slave woman. White women used Black women as a kind of spare wheel in order to prevent their husbands' departure. For them, their husband couldn't love a black woman because of her colour and her social status. The image which many whites had of African women is reflected in the picture of the "Mammy Caricature"¹³, which was used from slavery through the "Jim Crow" period

¹¹ LERNER Gerda, **Black Women In White America: A Documentary History**, Vintage Book Edition, New York, November 17, 1992, pp. 50 - 51

¹² LERNER Gerda, *Ibid.* p. 156

as a mean of showing how black women were happy with their condition of servitude. But, this image of a “mammy,” that is to say a fat, coarse, coloured women, was also a means of desexualizing slave women, an attempt to convince people that white men could never love black women nor even have sex with them because they were physically different from white women.

The use of this familiar caricature shows how slave women were used in different ways as toys by the entire white family. The ambiguous relationship between Black women and the white family was entertaining to the family. It caused a kind of disorder in the slave community, and more particularly in the relations between Black women and men.

II/ The Relations between Black Women and Black Men: The Heritage of Slavery.

Slave women, like Black men, were the property of their masters. Consequently, white masters could sexually aggress slave women at any moment. During that era of slavery, black men were angry when their masters raped their wives, sisters or daughters but they couldn't do anything. They couldn't defend their women because the laws were written by whites and for the advantage of whites. No laws took into account the humanity of Black people. The rape of the female slave was not recognized as an offence by the law. Professor Lerner cites an illustration of this southern tradition in the following extract, in which a Black woman recounts her experience and that of her husband when they denounced the obscene behaviour of a white employer toward this Black servant:

I remember very well the first and last work from which I was dismissed. I lost my place because I refuse to let the madam's husband kiss me. He must have been accustomed to undue familiarity with his servants, or else he took it as a matter of course, because without any love – making at all soon after I was installed as a cook, he walked up to me, threw his arms around me, and was in the act of kissing me, when I demanded to know what he meant, and shoved him away. I was young then and newly married and I didn't know then what has been a burden to my mind and heart ever since; that a coloured woman virtue in this part of the country has no protection. I at once went home and told my husband about it. When my husband went to the man who had insulted me, the man cursed him and slapped him, and – had him arrested. The police judge fined my husband \$25. I was present at the hearing, and testified on oath to the insult offered me. The white man, of course, denied the charge. The old judge looked up and said: “This court will never take the word of a nigger against the word of a white man.”¹⁴

Following the abolition of slavery, the white man's law, didn't recognize the full status of Blacks as human beings. Blacks didn't enjoy full protection of the law, and if they resisted white aggression, they were apt to be punished by the white man's law.

Though the law was against them, black men showed their anger in different ways. Some reacted by resorting to violence or simply refusing to work. Others preferred to marry women from other plantations in order not to be obliged to see their wives being raped without being able to react against it.¹⁵

The history of the sexuality of slavery had contributed a lot to the deterioration of the relationships between Black men and women. On the one hand, whites promoted slave “marriages” as it is shown in the following extract:

¹³**The Mammy Caricature**, <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies/>

¹⁴ LERNER Gerda, *op. cit.* pp. 155 – 156

¹⁵ **Slave Marriages**, <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASmarriage.htm>

On most of the plantations, where there was no lack of women, mating ranged from purely physical contact often enforced by the masters, to permanent associations in which genuine sentiment between the spouses and parental affection for children created a real family group. There were masters who without any regard of preferences of their slaves mated their human chattel as they did their stock. According to a former slave, the master in giving orders concerning their work ordered them to "get married".¹⁶

On the other hand, they were destroying the family structure by either having sex with the "wives" of slave men or selling the "husbands," "wives" and their children separately. The fact is that these "marriages" had no social value for whites beyond procreation for increasing the labor force. They were never "governed by a contractual agreement as were civil marriages"¹⁷. One early consequence of this was seen at the end of the civil war when slave women, whose husbands had served in the Union army, faced a problem of receiving pensions. The white authorities finally resorted to oral testimonies confirming their marriages in order to pay them their pensions.

When white masters forced their slaves to get married, it was not done at random. Though they wanted to tame the sexual impulses of Black men, who were described as sexual predators during that period, there was an economic reason behind this. In fact, Whites' main concern was to increase their slaves. This fact is explained in the following extract:

The [slave] family was also the main instrument for promoting the increase of the slave population. Planters believed that fertility rate would be highest when the family was strongest.¹⁸

In order to build strong families among slaves, white masters forbade divorce. But, promoting families was not for the benefit of slaves but for that of masters. In fact, in that era of slavery, what counted for a white master was his own benefit. Because of this, though they forbade divorce, masters didn't punish slave women and men who were unfaithful because it implied more slave children.

The truth is that slave women and men could not have stable relations. Their lives were controlled by masters who could break their marriages and family life at any time by selling them. Most of the time, slave men who were sold to another plantation started a new families. Frazier tells how after slavery divorce often occurred outside legal institutions for African Americans:

On the whole, in many of the small rural communities, there is a vague notion concerning the legal requirements for divorce. One man said that he did not need a divorce from his wife because "she was in one county and me in another."¹⁹

Because of whites handling of the black family, a marriage had no value even for slaves. It was not governed by love and mutual feelings. Blacks, like their white masters, put their own interests in the foreground.

¹⁶FRAZIER E. Franklin, *op. cit.* p.18

¹⁷ **From Slave Women to Free Women: The National Archives and Black Women's History in the Civil War Era**, by NORALEE Frankel © 1997, <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/slave-women.html>

¹⁸ FOGEL, Robert William and ENGERMAN Stanley L., **Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery**. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974., p. 421

¹⁹ FRAZIER E. Franklin, *op. cit.* p. 104

Under the mismanagement white overseers, Black families suffered desertions by husbands and the result was the growth of matriarchal families in which black women had to care for their children alone. This phenomenon of matriarchy was more visible when Black men moved to cities in order to look for employment.

Conclusion

Slavery was a destructive experience for African Americans. They had been dominated and oppressed for more than two hundred years. In fact, Blacks had been treated like a chattel by whites, whose original interest was to satisfy their need for labour in the New World. But, despite being forced to work, Black women were victims of sexual abuse by white masters whose goal was to control this labor force by attempting to dehumanize Black women and by trying to reinforce feelings of inadequacy in Black. For this and for the punishment they underwent when they refused their masters' sexual assaults, slave women can be said to have suffered doubly during that era of slavery. In fact, though it is said that some slave women willingly accepted their masters' overtures, it must be kept in mind that suffering was the main feeling of Black women during that period.

Whites had created lot of disturbance in their lives in particular, and through them they had weakened in the African American community. Beginning with the period of slavery, white property owners put their economic interests before any humanitarian concerns and this led them to destroy the Black family structure which would affect the future development of African American communities. By buying and selling Black people, white owners had not only caused the destruction of Black families but, they had also put into place control mechanisms that severely limited the lives of all Americans of African ancestry. Rather than learning to be the heads of families many Black men had learned to abdicate this social role and they were replaced by matriarchal families in which Black women learned to cope with the problems of raising children without men. This, once again, shows how the treatment of slave women was perpetuated to feed the financial greed of the white male power hierarchy after slavery. Blacks could not lead a normal life without racism anywhere in America because the "master race" both in the North and South found it useful to perpetuate stereotypes that would serve to stabilize the inequalities from which a considerable number of whites benefited financially. From the time of slavery the lives of Black people in America had changed, of course. During the First and Second World Wars when there was a labour in the United States Blacks were employed in well-paid jobs in order to keep the economy growing and to assure military victory.

What must not be forgotten, however, is that African Americans have never stopped fighting against racial prejudices and sexual abuses. This is their collective history. Some of the women reacted against sexual assaults by having abortions when they did not want to bear the child of the white master. But, above all, the most efficient method they developed was to speak out about their experiences in order to make people discover this hidden part of American history. We will never know the exact number of slave women who were raped, but the testimonies make us think that almost all of them had been raped.

Read their testimonies one cannot help but wonder about the use of such terms as "barbarians" and "savages," which whites were fond of using to describe Africans, "who needed to be civilized." From our study, we must conclude that what has been truly barbarian is the behaviour of whites toward African Americans, in general, and particularly towards African American women.

In addition to the social analysis presented in this essay, one must wonder if the sexual abuses we have described do not also have a psychological dimension: were they not, after all, motivated by white men's desires to discover the unknown, that is to say something different from what they were accustomed to. This question comes to my mind because my experience

as an African woman living in a predominantly white society informs me that, still today, racist white men do not consider a Black woman as somebody they could love, but rather as “a queer creature and unknown to them,” possibly to be discovered through sexual intercourse. One can only look forward to the day when this kind of racism will disappear, the day when people will understand the Other, who is “black,” is before everything else a human being like them.

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Thirteenth Amendment: it was ratified by Andrew Johnson. He replaced Abraham Lincoln, who was murdered on April, 14th, 1865. This Amendment stipulated that “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”²⁰

The Mammy caricature:



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It is an image used in order to show how slave women were happy of their condition of servitude.

The Middle Passage: it was a voyage composed of three parts:

-First part: Europeans came to Africa and brought with them iron, cloth, brandi, firearms, gunpowder etc. They exchanged those goods for Africans and kidnapped some Africans on the West African's coasts.

-2nd part: they went to American and exchanged those African slaves for sugar, tobacco etc.

-3rd part: they went back to Europe.

If we try to schematize this, we will have a triangular picture. America was called the middle passage because it constituted the middle part of this triangular trade.

²⁰ **Thirteenth Amendment**, <http://www.answers.com/topic/amendment-xiii-ti-the-u-s-constitution>

²¹ **Mammy Stereotypes**, <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies/more/mammy01.htm>

