

MEN AND THEIR PORTRAYAL IN *BELOVED*: THE FRAMING OF BLACK AND WHITE MASCULINITIES IN A SLAVE-OWNING WORLD

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Abstract:

Because Toni Morrison explores the lives of women in all her novels, most critics read her works as mainly woman-centered while most studies of her male characters present the men and their stories as secondary to that of the women characters. However, Morrison also explores the constructions of masculinities as complicated by race and history in her works. Through her male characters' lives in *Beloved*, Morrison demonstrates the complexities and paradoxes inherent in the making of black masculinities and the oppression and denial of selfhood they experience in a slave-owning era. She thus tells the stories of black male characters and invests them with voice and visibility. To clearly bring out the realities of being black, male and subordinated, she contrasts black masculinities with the dominant white hegemonic masculinity practices that restrict and negatively define black men. Using the lives of selected black and white male characters in *Beloved*, this paper examines the manifestations of white hegemonic masculinities in the white characters' lives and their impact on black men. It also analyzes the creation and operations of black or subordinated masculinities within the oppressive and often horrific circumstances in which black men find themselves.

Key Words: Hegemonic masculinities, Subordinated masculinities, Slave narratives, racism

Introduction

Beloved is a twentieth century novel fashioned as a historical slave narrative that is set in the era after the Civil War in Cincinnati. Its story is told from the perspective of former slaves, and the novel depicts their resilience and incredible will to survive in a peculiarly harsh world. *Beloved* also attempts to augment slave narratives in order to fill in the missing pieces of information on slaves' lives. This was because most slave narratives were characterized by self-masking in order to make them acceptable to the white reading public of earlier times. As Morrison states of her work, her task was one of "how to rip the veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate and to fill in the blanks that the narratives have left" (Henderson, 63). *Beloved* is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave woman who kills her baby daughter, rather than let her grow up a slave. Even though it seems to be Garner's story, it is also very much the story of male characters such as Paul D, Sixo and Halle. As Morrison points out, "*Beloved* was about those anonymous people called slaves . . ." (Sitter 17). This shows Morrison's concern with both men and women. Additionally, the stories of the women characters in *Beloved* are incomplete without those of the men's. *Beloved* then is not only Morrison's attempt to give Garner a voice but to highlight the circumstances and position of black men and tell their stories from their own perspectives—a viewpoint that has often been denigrated and denied expression in their white and racist world.

Male Portrayals in *Beloved*

Sixo is a pivotal character through whom Morrison portrays an alternative African-based masculinity. Sixo is one of six male slaves on the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky, and he is described as a confident person. He comes from and has grown up in Africa and so he knows his roots and culture. He is "Indigo with a flame-red tongue" indicating his unmixed African heritage (21). He is gentle and speaks English. He tries to keep alive his African way of life by replicating the cooking methods of his native country. Because of this, he cooks potatoes in a hot pit but they are never well done. The other Sweet Home men laugh at his attempts, but he is undeterred. His

experimentation shows an inquiring and persistent mind that seeks to improve. So determined is he to remember his African life that he decides to disregard American time, and stubbornly sticks to telling time from his own perspective “so he never got it right” (21). In African traditional belief, “time is simply a composition of events that have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur” writes Mbiti. “The linear concept of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite, is practically foreign to African thinking,” he concludes (17). Because of this concept, Sixo miscalculates his rendezvous time when he goes to meet his lover, Patsy. Yet he walks sixty miles in thirty-four hours, with only an hour of rest, and time enough to say hello to his Thirty- Mile woman. Sixo has the qualities of strength and endurance associated with a warrior, but without the violence that is an integral part of a warrior’s life. His slave circumstances modify his ability to practice a dominant and martial kind of masculinity. Sixo is a loving, patient person who cherishes his lover, and his funny mistakes make him human. Here, Morrison points to an alternative masculinity that is at once both strong and humane.

Morrison’s depiction of Sixo contradicts the prevailing, white beliefs about African men. Commenting on these beliefs, Segal reveals that eighteenth-and nineteenth-century white philosophers and slavers such as William Harris, Thomas Carlyle, and Thomas Huxley, described Africans as “inferior breeds of men” and “absolute savages full of evil passions” (171). Sixo does not conform to these stereotypes in intellect or attitude. He has a deep knowledge of the land and agriculture, and he is very intelligent. When the crops fail on Sweet Home farm, Sixo is the one who realizes that there are pests destroying the vine. It is clear that he is in tune with plant and natural life, and is an intelligent and rational person.

Sixo’s manhood is manifested in his knowledge and farsightedness. He is very observant, so, even though he is not schooled in the Western mode of education, he analyzes situations accurately. He is the one who says that their owner, Garner’s death is a murder. He alone notices the bullet-hole in Garner’s head. Again, he tells the Sweet Home slave men that Mrs Garner is sick because schoolteacher is slowly poisoning her with medicine used for putting down horses. Nothing escapes him. At night, he creeps around and outside the farm, observing the lay of the land. It is not surprising that he is the first Sweet Home slave to learn about the train. He realizes that the most pernicious effect of slavery is the culture of brainwashing. He thus resists any imposition and influences of white culture. He refuses to learn to read and write because he sees that education is not an innocent process, but a means of transmitting cultural values. Because of this, he concludes that Western education will enslave his mind and ruin his culture and he refuses to be schooled. Sixo’s strong belief in the validity of the oral cultural traditions of Africa convinces him that “reading and writing would make him forget things he shouldn’t” (219).

Sixo’s masculinity is also characterized by spirituality and a deep love and respect for nature. Once, before entering the Redmen’s (Native Americans’) structure, he asks permission from them before entering the structure (25). After that, he asks for their presence to be with him. He clearly exhibits the African belief in ancestors—the living –dead of the spiritual world. In his study of the spirits of the living-dead, Mbiti states that Africans are most concerned with the living-dead and believe that “it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. They are still a part of their human families” (83). Africans also see the living-dead as “the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities” (83). Because of this belief, Sixo respects others’ culture—an attitude that is opposite to white, male cultural practices of demeaning, dissecting and desecrating others’ culture and artifacts. Like many Africans, Sixo believes that Nature is a living thing that communicates with humans. Mbiti states that in Africa, “in a few cases, the wind is associated with God. Some people describe him metaphorically as being like the wind or air, or moving like the wind; and others think that the wind is one of the vehicles by which God travels in great power through the sky” (54). Because of his worldview, Sixo asks the wind to help him find Patsy, his lover when she fails to arrive at their meeting place. She has apparently lost her way but the wind helps Sixo find her. Here, Morrison validates the power and reality of alternative African beliefs that seem nonsensical to Western minds. Despite the fact that Sixo wants to spend time with Patsy, he knows that her absence might be detected by her owner so he shows her a shortcut by which to get back quickly to the plantation, thirty miles away. To save her from possible trouble, he punctures her heel to fake a snakebite accident to her master. Sixo is at once a loving and compassionate person and at the same time, he demonstrates masculine skills of strength, endurance and athletic abilities—qualities

associated with warriors in Africa of that period. Sixo's characterization illustrates the complex nature of masculinities by revealing how apparently contradictory qualities can constitute a positive type of masculinity. Morrison draws Sixo on a mythical scale, especially in his warrior-like abilities. Warriors have long been respected and legendary figures in African mythology. They are known for their courage, endurance, stealth, intelligence and encounters with supernatural forces. Sixo has these manly qualities, yet he is also endowed with humane qualities of love and gentleness. Despite his masculine traits, Sixo does not hurt or dominate his friends.

Sixo observes African customs and demonstrates strong powers of storytelling and dancing, traits usually regarded as womanly by white, masculine culture, but which in African cultures are considered as an equally masculine and feminine art form. In Sixo's recounting of a tale, "He told his story in the peculiar way that made them cry-laugh" (25). Sixo brings this expressive and artistic talent from Africa. He draws on the culture of storytelling and performance, replicated night after night, in African villages and towns. Sixo dances naked among the trees at night "to keep his bloodlines open" (25). This is possibly a ritual dance used to re-affirm who he is in a strange land, and help him hold on to the memory of his people and culture. It is clear that Sixo has a strong sense of identity and self because he has grown up in Africa before being forcibly brought to America. His total rejection of white, American, masculinist culture is evident when he refuses to speak English any more. He stops "because there was no future in it" (25). He knows that there is no possibility of acceptance for the black man in white America, no matter how hard he tries to assimilate because the stigma of racism and slavery cannot be taken away. He does not feel the need to conform to a system based on an ethos of violence and domination. He still remembers a different and more humane cultural reality and existence.

Sixo feels no loyalty to any white man. He has escaped the cultural brainwashing of a white, dominant culture and masculinity. He is already assured of his manhood, and he is not dependent on any one to call him a man. Sixo has no fear or respect for Garner, schoolteacher or the slavers. He is a unique individual, and Mrs. Garner knows this. That is why she wants to find out how Schoolteacher is treating him. He is the only Sweet Home man who does not feel sorry that Garner is dead. Later, when Schoolteacher takes over Sweet Home and begins to systematically destroy the slaves' lives, Paul D says of Sixo, "he was mighty sorry" that Garner was dead (219). He understands how slave society is organized, based on racial stereotypes and suspicions of black men. Sixo argues that Mrs Garner calls in Schoolteacher because "she need another white on the place" (220). She is part of the system that mistrusts blacks, no matter how loyal they are. Sixo knows that to whites at this time, a black man is less than human. He is basically a brute who is dangerous to white women. "The notion that Negro men were particularly virile, promiscuous, and lusty was not new in the eighteenth century," writes Winthrop Jordan, "but the English colonists in America showed signs of adding a half-conscious and revealingly specific corollary: They sometimes suggested that Negro men lusted after white women" (151). It is sad that the other Sweet Home men on the plantation are naïve on that score. They think their relationship with Garner protects them from the brutalities of the slave system. This is why when Sixo warns them about Schoolteacher, they dismiss his words as "dark stories" (221). When Schoolteacher begins to teach them things they cannot learn, Sethe, Halle's wife says, "we all laughed about that—except Sixo" (190). Because Sixo is perceptive and mentally outside the slave system, he is aware of its destructive power.

Sixo's forebodings about Schoolteacher are proven true when Schoolteacher criminalizes every action the slave men take, and maltreats them. All the limited freedom Garner gives the Sweet Home men is taken away. Sixo kills a shoat because they are now underfed and he is interrogated like a criminal, but he faces Schoolteacher without fear. His astute mind, and irreverence for the trappings of white masculinity are seen when he replies that his act means, "improving your property" (190). The dialog between Schoolteacher and Sixo shows two sets of values and oppositional ways of seeing. Even though Sixo wins the argument with him, Schoolteacher "beats him anyway to show that definitions belong to the definers—not the defined" (190). This is an act of power to teach Sixo and the other black men their subject position. Connell calls the kind of power wielded by schoolteacher and other whites, 'hegemony'. "Hegemony," he writes, "relates to the cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within the overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men" (78). Morrison exposes the extent to which black masculinity is circumscribed by white oppression in this instance. Schoolteacher further

restricts the little freedom Sixo and the others have by taking away their guns, banning them from going off the plantation and treating them like children.

Sixo's desire for freedom is strong and he begins to plan his escape especially when he realizes that Schoolteacher is a cruel master. When he suggests that the other slave men leave Sweet Home too, they ask him to delay his plans. Because of these men's loyalty to Garner, they decide to wait a littler longer before escaping. Meanwhile Sixo prepares for his day of freedom. His knowledge of the lay of the land and stars help him as he observes the North Star that will aid their escape. The North Star is a common image in antislavery culture, and stands as a beacon of hope and a guide to freedom for slaves. Sixo is practical, takes initiative and makes the contact for guides to help in their escape. He also manages to hide the supplies that he knows will be needed for their journey. Amidst this preparation, he neither hesitates nor shows fear even though he is aware of the consequences of being found out.

Unfortunately, because of so many delays, Sixo's escape plan is detected and then he and the other men are punished. Sixo and Paul D are surprised and arrested, but not before Sixo manages to help Sethe's children and Patsy, his woman to escape. Paul A is hanged and Halle goes mad after witnessing Sethe's violation by Schoolteacher's nephews. Sixo is recaptured but he does not go without a fight. Even with his hands tied, he wrestles the gun out of the white men's hands and manages to crack one person's ribs but he is knocked out, and when he comes to, he is tied to a tree. Sixo begins to sing in his language—a song that is described as frightening and powerful, and which also makes his captors uneasy and afraid. Listening to it, Paul D "understood the sound: hatred so loose it was juba" (227). This symbolizes the depth of Sixo's hatred and contempt for the white men, and slavery. Sixo's warrior-like qualities are reshaped to meet a different need. Instead of violence and bloody deeds, Sixo's battle is against fear, yet his mind overcomes the fear of his captors and his impending, horrible death.

Paul D reflects later that even though slave society denies a person power and authority, things that signify manhood in slave society, Sixo's African-inspired masculinity causes him to display resolve, courage and autonomy over his own life. Due to the influence of the alternative norms he lives by, he does not hesitate to employ his intellect and belief systems to aid the slave men's plan for freedom. Because he refuses to be influenced by the prevailing culture, his African based masculinity functions as an oppositional element in the white, slave society. His masculinity practice is modified because of his location within a racist, cultural system and its severe restrictions on his life. So, even though Sixo's masculinity is not defined or animated by the same factors that empower and shape white masculinities, it takes as its source, those African norms that he learned back home, to forge a new and alternative masculinity that is suitable for coping with his situation. This alternative masculinity ensures that Sixo's mind is his own. Through Sixo, Morrison shows how an alternative, yet subordinated manhood can still negotiate within a horrific and restricted system, to forge a brotherhood with other slave men, and to be a source of knowledge and inspiration to them and their families.

Sixo's courage even in the face of death is remarkable and makes us aware that a person can be heroic even in terrible circumstances. After his escape plan is detected, Sixo's song and fearless attitude indicate that he is a man that the slavers can never break so Schoolteacher orders him to be burnt, saying, "This one will never be suitable" (226). As he burns, Sixo begins to laugh "a rippling sound like Sethe's sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rainwater" (226). His actions are shocking and inexplicable to the white men gathered around because his flesh and clothes are burning and his laughter expresses pure delight. Because of Sixo's cultural beliefs, he knows that death only releases him from an oppressive system, to the world of his ancestors. As an African man and warrior, Sixo would be expected to display endurance and courage in the face of extreme torture and death. This is the ultimate test of African manhood, and his attitude frightens his white captors, "men who were not embarrassed that their manhood lay in their guns... men who made even vixens laugh" (162). Morrison portrays the difference between African-based and white American cultural ideas of masculinities in this incident. To the African mind, white masculinities are worthless and cowardly, because they depend on guns and brute force. Seeing that they cannot stand or stop Sixo's defiant song and laughter, the men shoot him, but not before he shouts his final chant, "Seven O, Seven O" (226). His seed has escaped with his woman, Patsy. The continuation of his lineage is assured and he knows his death is not in vain. Sixo's life and the manner of his death also serve as a source of

inspiration for Paul D as he attempts to forge a more viable manhood for himself. Noting the place of white violence within the system of masculinities, Connell writes: “Many members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance”, he continues, “violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles” (83). The violence done to Sixo and the Sweet Home men can then be analyzed as much more than isolated acts of punishment, and be regarded as a contest of masculinities. Because of the gun, the slaves lose out physically, but not mentally, as Morrison shows with Sixo.

Other black men such as Halle are also positively portrayed in *Beloved*. Halle is as astute as Sixo in his analyses of the slave system and slave master. Even when Sethe says that Garner is better than Schoolteacher and other slave masters, Halle replies that there is no difference between them. He is not fooled by Garner’s supposed goodness in letting him buy back his mother. He lets Sethe understand that that arrangement profits only Garner: “I pay him for her last years and in return he got you, me, and three more coming up” (196) he states. Halle is very gentle, hard working, and the most pleasant of the Sweet Home men. He learns to read and write, and his intelligence is proven by the fact that he is Garner’s bookkeeper. He is a loving son who hires out his time and gets deeply in debt to procure his mother’s freedom. He is a strong man who is loyal to the Garners and other Sweet Home men. He is also described as a compassionate man. Denver says of him “my daddy was an angel man. He could tell where you hurt and he could fix it too” (208). He cherishes Sethe and treats her as an equal. He dreams of freedom for his whole family but his plans are thwarted when Schoolteacher forbids him from hiring himself out to buy his family back. Halle does not make it to freedom. After watching Sethe’s violation at the hands of Schoolteacher’s nephews, he goes mad. He is seen at the end with clabber smeared all over his face. However, because of his love for family and friends and his sense of responsibility for them, his life exhibits a positive and nurturing kind of masculinity.

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses two white men to paint a picture of white masculinity and to contrast it with black masculinities. The first white man one meets is Garner. He runs “a special kind of slavery” (140). Baby Suggs observes that he does not “stud” his slaves or rent them out for sexual use as other slavers do (140). Garner’s slaves bear arms, an act that is illegal in Kentucky. They are free to advise or criticize him and choose how to do their chores. However, the perceptive Baby Suggs worries about the lack of female companions for the maturing men. Garner does not really care about that aspect, and the men end up having sex with cows. Despite being outwardly benevolent, Garner toys with the lives of his slaves. He treats them differently in order to live up to his boast that he has the power to make them men. Writing about white masculinity, Connell notes “White men’s masculinities, for instance, are created not only in relation to white women but also to black men” (75). Garner’s ability to control others makes him a man. He boasts to his neighbors about his power to confer manhood on his slaves. This ends up “in a fierce argument, sometimes a fight, and Garner came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated one more time what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men” (11).

Garner’s masculinity represents one mold of white masculinities that displays contradictions, which eventually destroys him. On the one hand, he seems compassionate and non-racist, but on the other hand, Garner displays attributes of the dominant masculinity. He is a competitive, rugged, boastful, risk-taking and violent person. He wants his neighbors to acknowledge his superiority in intelligence, physical strength and control of slaves. He is a rebel in the slave society, not because he cares about his slaves, but because he needs to prove his masculinity to all. Eventually, his attitude gets him killed. Looking closely at his acts, one realizes that he forbids his slaves to go anywhere, except in his company, not because of the law but what he sees as “the danger of men-bred slaves on the loose” (141). He is implicated in maintaining a hegemonic masculinity and keeping his men subordinated in the same way as the most debased slavers of his era. Even his agreement to let Halle buy his mother, Baby Suggs’ freedom is not motivated by kindness but by profit, and Baby Suggs and Halle recognize that. Garner is the only one who gains in this transaction. It is not surprising that Halle and Sixo do not see any difference between him and Schoolteacher.

Schoolteacher is outwardly very different from Garner. He lacks the physical presence of the former. Sethe describes him as “a little man. Short. Always wore a collar even in the fields” (36). He “talks soft and spit in handkerchiefs. Gentle in a lot of ways. You know the kind who know Jesus by name . . .” (37). The men realize that he is physically weak but cunning. Schoolteacher’s

appearance and actions are contrary to the masculine norms of the day, yet he wreaks the greatest destruction on the Sweet Home men. Morrison uses him to portray the most dangerous and insidious aspects of slavery. Schoolteacher is obviously well educated, a Christian and pseudo-scientist who has imbibed the 'learned' discourse on Africans and Negroes and does 'research' on the slaves at the plantation. He quickly takes away whatever rights the men have and claims that there is no way a slave can be a man. He starves the Sweet Home men and beats them to show his power. His masculinity is representative of another mold, which is different from Garner's. Schoolteacher's masculinity is based more on intellectual pursuits and psychological manipulation. Even though he lacks the physical prowess to do 'manly' things, he is cunning enough to manipulate others to do his dirty work. His nephews and other white men kill and violate the slaves on his orders. His acts achieve more horrific results than those of the slave owners who control their slaves through the use of force. Morrison portrays Schoolteacher in such a negative light because she is aware that men such as Schoolteacher are responsible for formulating subtle and lying 'facts' that have created racist theories and led to the brutalization and exploitation of millions of black people.

Schoolteacher debases Sethe by studying her 'animal' characteristics. Here, he is cast in the mold of Charles White, who in the eighteenth century, claimed to have studied the Negro as a species and "found him to be an inferior species of man who closely resembled the ape in many ways" (Jordan 501). Jordan also quotes Cotton Mather, the American religious reformer, as writing about blacks thus: "Indeed their stupidity is a discouragement" (187). Schoolteacher's catalog of "characteristics" that purportedly describes the animalistic traits of black people was actually based on a list of black characteristics documented by a slave owner--Arthur Lee. Lee claimed that "African characteristics were cruelty, cunning, perfidy and cowardice. Their feeding habits were like those of absolute brutes" (309). Lee also declared that Africans' understanding was shallow and their hearts vindictive and base (309). These theories were dangerous and still have destructive power in today's world.

The formulation of these theories were not accidental or innocent acts; they were important to the construction of white masculinity. While the white man represented the mind, in the eyes of white writers, the black man represented the body. The white man was rational, courageous, knowledgeable and powerful, whereas the black man was irrational, cowardly, ignorant and destined to serve the white races. Segal writes that the white public in Europe and America of the 1800's were acquainted with racist views that claimed that black men were infantile and mentally inept (169). Segal also exposes the literature of devaluation produced in the eighteenth century which described blacks as "beastly, lascivious, ugly and violent" and presented slavery as beneficial for the "poor wretches" (169). The black man was used "as the necessary foil, the essential opposition, giving substance to the superiority of the white man", Segal concludes (172). Jonathan Rutherford notes that "the history of imperialism and the colonial experience has produced a meaning of blackness, of an Other that constructs a sense of white supremacy and coherence in relation to this alien threat" (60). Schoolteacher and other white men's fear of having a black man around white women was because they saw him as a hypersexed being who desired white women. Jordan quotes other writers of that period who claim that "the penis of an African is larger than that of an European" (501), an indication that he was lascivious. Analyzing this fear of black men, Jordan states "it is apparent that white men projected their own desires onto Negroes" (151). Segal also writes about the hypersexed image that white males have traditionally given to the black man. She quotes James Baldwin as saying "the white man's private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro" (176). Rutherford also argues that the black man "becomes the constructed image of the white man's repressed lust; imbued with an animal-like sexuality and a huge penis, a body closer to nature than the 'cultured' white man. These are images of what the white man denies in himself" (63). Commenting on the damage this theory has created, Baldwin says "If you want to know about the unhealthy psyche of a white man, ask a black man" (qtd. in Segal,176).

Another terrible fallout of these oppositional masculinity practices has been the lynching of hundreds of black people, and the myth of the black rapist. Segal and Jordan state that the reality has been the rape of thousands of black women by white men, which has led to the creation of mixed-race people in America. Through Schoolteacher, Morrison effectively brings up these issues, and shows how intricately racism and slavery are bound up with white masculinities. She also exposes the subtleties that mask virulent forms of racism and masculinity behind a benevolent or rational mask.

Analyzing the conditions black men experience, Connell writes, “Hegemonic masculinity among whites sustains the institutional oppression and physical terror that have framed the making of masculinities in black communities” (80). Despite these harsh realities, the male characters in *Beloved* are not deterred in their quest for identity and wholeness.

Conclusion

It is clear that black masculine ideals are equated with the attainment of personal freedom and a measure of autonomy for the black male characters. None of the black males analyzed in this article achieve these goals fully but they still manage to create an alternative masculinity that refuses to follow a pattern of domination and violence such as characterizes hegemonic, white masculinity. Thus, Morrison’s portrayal of Sixo validates an African-based brand of masculinity that is not patriarchal in nature and is characterized by compassion, love and respect for women, other cultures and nature. Through Halle also, Morrison shows the nurturing, sacrificial, loving and intelligent aspects of alternative black masculinities. Finally, through her positive depictions of these black male characters, Morrison proves that she does not only portray one-sided and often pathological male characters as Holloway and Demetrakopoulous (86) note, but she also validates and centers positive male characters in her works.

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