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## The Trauma of Slave Women in Humus

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### ABSTRACT

The story of slavery is always told from the masculine perspective neglecting the suffering of women who were also taken into captivity and forced into labor. Many people who talk about this horrific story speak of the suffering of men taken against their will at the expense of that of women. For this reason, Fabienne Kanor, a Martinican writer chose to tell the story of African slave women of different origins and the different forms of abuses and sufferings they suffered during their crossing of the Atlantic Ocean to other parts of the world to work as slaves. This work discusses their suffering by exposing their collective and individual traumas.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Trauma, Sexual Exploitation, Nostalgie.

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### 1. Introduction

Slave trade is thought to have taken approximately twenty million Africans who were forcefully carried away from the shores of Africa to work as servants in other parts of the world. Mustakeem (2018) describes slavery as a condition of a person or people in permanent servitude dating back to practices of human bondage that began during the ancient times. Evidences from the bible, Ephesians 6:5 (Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and with sincerity of heart...) and Ephesians 6:9 (And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them...) show that slavery dates back from antiquity until 1807 when the Slave Trade Abolition bill was passed by the British House of Lords to abolish it. There is however no evidence that slaves were better treated overall in the Christian roman empire than previously. Archer (1988) We can therefore conclude that slavery has always based on the principles of violence, torture and pain because it takes an unimaginable amount of force to displace an individual from his home to instill fear in him by putting him under a perpetual state of servitude.

In the past, historians, writers and film makers have exposed the horrific story of slavery in different forms (movies, plays, books, presentations etc) but in most cases these stories depict slave men while less is often spoken of the agony of women who suffered the same fate and taken into slavery.

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In 2006, Fabienne Kanor published *Humus*, a herstory based on fourteen slave women of African descent who were captured from their native soils and taken away into slavery. As a descendant of Martinique who traces her origin from Africa, Kanor passionately wrote this story from a woman's point of view and gave voices to these voiceless women. In the book, each captive voices out her nightmares in the hands of the slave masters who maltreated them as a result of the color of their skin. This study takes a critical look at women slaves and the various forms of physical, emotional and the psychological pain that traumatized their situation as slaves in the hands of slave masters who transported them across the Atlantic Ocean.

## 2. Methodology

In this work, we shall analyze *Humus* by exposing the different forms of suffering, pain and abuse that female slaves endured in the slave ship on their journey into the unknown and how the writer exposes their trauma of forced servitude and complete subordination in relation to the unpleasant circumstances of their trip across the Atlantic Ocean. We shall discuss the trauma of sexual exploitation and the trauma of displacement which is linked to the dramatic loss of identity and meaning.

## 3. Findings

To begin with, we discuss the sexual exploitation of the bodies of the slave women and the traumatic impact on the female slaves. It is widely recognized that compulsory sexual relations were characteristics of most forms of slavery for women and some men. Enslaved women and girls were frequently raped especially in trade process. Robertson (2015). The female slaves did not consent to most of the sexual acts that took place in the slave ship. The women were deprived of the value, the prestige and the pride that a woman normally attaches to her feminine personality. These slave masters transformed the sexual organ of these women into an object of pleasure and a means of entertainment in the ship just to satisfy their sexual desires.

In the book, *La muette*, a slave explains that: "One night they ate my stomach. The man was alone but it was as if there were a hundred. I had no more tears when he entered. (19) What *La Muette* says about her sexual experience tells us about the pain and how she felt in the body during the time of this sexual assault. Sex is an act of pleasure that is not meant to punish the other partner. The description of just one man as a hundred reminds us of the wickedness, cruelty and lack of respect for this woman. The unpleasantness of this sexual intercourse puts the woman in a state of physical insecurity and fear. We find this sexual experience to be violent and abusive. She continued: "until all of the man's water is gone. He didn't do it again, probably he knew about my finger. Now it hurts when I look at my hand. (19) According to Eyerman (2003), trauma links past to present through representation and imagination. Therefore, her hand became a symbol of trauma for her. This part of the body always reminds her of everything she endured. She hated the fact that she did not consent to this sex with the slave master, she also hated that the sex was not based on any love or affection for her: "the man entered into me, spoiled this music that rocks childhood. I hate men! And I don't believe that will change. " (23) Usually one becomes traumatized by the painful experiences that one endures at some point in life.

Most of the time, the victims of such situations overcome these problems through the intervention of others. In the absence of support or comfort, traumatized people end up killing themselves to avoid the pain of remembering what they have gone through. In slavery, most of these women did not have the opportunity to talk to others about what they are going through because each of them had their own problems to deal with.

*La Muette* is not the only slave exploited in this way in the slave ship. In the case of *La Blanche*, the slave master took advantage of her suffering to abuse her body for sexual pleasures. She had to consent to the sailor's sexual fantasies in order to survive the unsettling situation in the boat: "And I, *La Blanche*, have decided not to die. It would be too stupid. Not fair. Not made for that. Never really suffered. Always took the best. This is called luck. "(97)," Did the thing to me and then fed me, that same evening, in the bedroom. It was good, almost too much, but I wanted more. Have a full stomach until the morning, never felt hungry again. By eating, I erased the stain within myself. I am *La Blanche*.

Not like the others. Half captive. "(100) The sailor, Jehan de Nantes had neither love nor affection for her:" They say I was proud and that a man touched me. A tall white man, a master, who has since turned his back on me, walks past me without even looking at me. I know he is a crazy and a changing heart. "(118)

La Blanche expresses her emotional state of sadness over her relationship with the sailor. She was disappointed, depressed and felt cheated for not receiving any affection from the man who abuses her body for pleasure. She expected the sailor to show her love after having sex with her: "[...] he doesn't want me anymore as they say of rotten fruit, smelly meat. Never again will he dare to put his thing in me, eat my mouth, ever. Back in the place where they house the captives, I lay down and wanted to die. All around, the women were laughing. It was La Blanche they were mocking, me alone now, ugly, pitiful. (112) The sailor did not only sexually abuse her, he also took the freedom of this female slave in the boat. She did not have the right to be free in the evening like other women: "[...] my nights belong to the sailor," she explains. "(156)

La Blanche appeared to have consented to the sexual relationship with the sailor but she did not do it out of her own will. She did it to secure her safety on the boat. She did not want to die of hunger like the other women. It was a strategy La Blanche used to survive in the slave ship. Therefore, we categorize this type of relationship between sailor and slave as sexual abuse. One may ask why these slave masters have so much interest in exploiting these women sexually while they hated the color of their skin?

We see a kind of similarity in the relationship between La Blanche and the Sailor and that of Jacob Luis and Tima in *The Villainous Life* by Condé. In this book, we read the story of a man named Jacob Louis who: "At nineteen, had never made love!" (108) Tima, his wife was never happy in this marriage because Jacob Louis exploited her body sexually for excessive pleasure:" he explored every nook and cranny, penetrated all her orifices. "(109)

Despite the old age of La vieille, she was not excluded in this situation of sexual exploitation of the bodies of the slave women: "Who is the master crazy enough to ride an old woman? And yet, on certain nights he would run against my door, round as a barrel, drunk as a pig [...]. I never opened. I had too much hate and no desire to do battle with their law. (39) An attempt to sleep with this weak, wrinkled old woman shows the inhuman nature of these slave masters towards the female African slaves in captivity. As explained by The Old Woman, she was angry because she felt dishonored and disrespected by an attempt to sleep with her despite her wrinkled body. The old woman was worried because in her native land, nobody would have the moral right to attempt such as act. Patterson (1982) writes that a slave could have no honor because of the origin of his status, the indignity and all pervasiveness of his indebtedness, his absence of any independent social experience but most of all because he was without power except through another.

According to Irigaray (1977), a woman in this sexual imaginary is only an object, more or less complacent in the enactment of men's fantasies. That she finds enjoyment by proxy. But this is above all masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not hers: which leaves her in a state of dependence on the man. Not knowing what she wants, she is ready for anything even when he "takes" her as the "object" to exercise his pleasure.

Normally, a man and a woman who have sex should all enjoy the pleasure that comes with it. But that is not the case in this circumstance. The sole purpose of the sexual relationship is to punish the poor female slaves. The men did not take pity on the fact that the female slaves cried out in agony. The Women were traumatized by the pain of being used as a play object. They were traumatized because they no longer controlled their bodies. They were reduced to animals locked up and controlled by another.

In addition, we see the trauma of displacement among the women abducted from their homes in Africa and taken to the slave ship. When someone is forced to leave their homeland against their will, it always leaves unforgettable trauma in them. Such a situation is seen in the context of longing for the beautiful memories of their lives.

These slave women suffered the trauma of nostalgic memory and the desire to return home. Each of them had their own reason for wanting to return home. These white masters did not capture these women in one place but they did capture them in different places in Africa. There were the

baoulés, the yoroubas, the ashantis, the noupés etc. The La Vieille confirms: "at the beginning, there were only about ten of us, women from all over Africa, crammed into this room where you only had to close your eyes to believe that death had come to take you" (32). Her main concern was that she didn't know where they were being sent: "The worst part is not knowing where to go. All my life I have known where to set my feet [...] "(32)," How would I know then that after the sea would come the land? That on this earth would grow water. Water flowing into the sea that would never end!" (33). As a mother, she was extremely concerned for the welfare of her children. In captivity, she was traumatized by the pain and suffering her children might experience in her absence: "I have been a good mother. I am proud of my children even though I don't always agree with them and Kissi worries me sometimes." (31) Because of her old age, she was also afraid of not surviving the trip: "I didn't think I could last. Dragging my body around all day, keeping it away from the whip which suddenly slams because you have to hurry." (31)

In this difficult moment, she consoled herself with her mother's words: "My mother says we have to let it go because we are not powerful enough and only the gods know. »(31) She remained strong by the belief that everything that happens in life is predestined by the gods. Through her wisdom and belief, she became a source of motivation for other women who were devastated by the unpleasant circumstances of this trip: "We survived. Despite the deaths, the shame, the hunger. Despite the wedges. (29) For the others, the memory of their families and the memory of community life in their native countries were unforgettable for these women slaves. With the slave masters, the women felt lost and less secure. La Petite one said: "I feel my mother's hand on my skin, the path of her fingers going from top to bottom, removing the dirt and evil from me day and night." Mom who rocks the ferryman, the one who guides me to the land of happiness, where the trees sing. Where I would like to stay forever. She had always been there on time, my mother. " (135). La Patite was worried by her mother's absence on the slave ship because she was young and she had an intimate relationship with her mother in her homeland. "Every time my hand searched for it, terrified it might fall back empty, dangling. She was there. Always. I never had to remember her. (135) This painful memory left a trauma in La petite's dismantled body. But she encouraged herself not to die by the dangers and the nightmare of the trip: "One night when I couldn't sleep, I approached the circle and listened to her. Thus opened her story: I, little Amazon girl, daughter of Sosu the warrior and a panther, I swear not to let the shackles take me!" (160)

La Muette also had a nostalgic memory of the happiness of her native country: "in the country, men do not know what to cry means, their language does not know this word. There are many others: eating, dancing, cooking, hunting, fishing, farming. In the country, women are always happy. Whatever they do put a song in their mouth [...] (18). Unfortunately, those privileges of life that she had known in her native land were no longer available to her in the slave ship. Her new life only brings fear, hunger, pain and suffering.

In addition, L'esclave explains: "I am from the Noupé country. This is where I was born, under a black sun. From my mother, who had come up too early, I inherited the smile." (37) In the boat, L'esclave no longer sees the smile that she knew from her mother in Noupé, her native country. She has known hunger, thirst and violence. "I haven't taken anything for three days when the door opens and I'm kicked out." (61)," The skies are passing and I am thirsty. " (61)," there is violence in the eyes of our masters, curses in their mouths when they burn our bellies " (62). At one point, she wanted to die because of the pain.

Despite the ethnic differences that existed between these women, they were able to negotiate among themselves to end their lives together by jumping into the sea because of fear and the inhuman treatment of the slave masters, insecurity and trauma. They made this decision because they believed it was the best way to end the horrors of this journey. La Petite said: "this morning, some women began to sing. It's as good as a lullaby. It was beautiful. Even the bad guys didn't dare say anything. They let it go, they know that it is our last day before the big exit." (163)

Each of them had her own reason for jumping into the sea. For La Blanche, La petite explains that: "[...] it seems that the sailor maltreated her, that it was this heartache that led her to join us. [...] " (163) She felt betrayed by the sailor who abused her body and abandoned her. L'esclave says: "[...] there is violence in the eyes of our masters, curses in their mouths when they burn our bellies. They always laugh afterwards, comparing us to black monkeys, those who inhabit the mountains of great

Arabia. (62) L'esclave decided to jump because of the violent, wicked and callous nature of these white masters who punished them for their selfish purpose. The women were emotionally and psychologically troubled by the fact that they lost their freedoms, the fact that they did not know where they were being sent to and the fact that their destinies were changed.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that *Humus* is a book written with the aim of showing the new generation how black slaves especially women were taken from Africa and sold like cattle abroad. Kanor gives voice to these women to remind us of the immeasurable suffering not only of these slave women but also of the deplorable and unimaginable condition in which they were sent abroad. In the book, we realize that the women did not only suffer violence at the hands of these white masters. They also suffered different forms of sexual abuse for the benefit of the slave masters. Some of these sexual acts were committed in an aggressive manner, which put the women in a state of pain, fear and trauma. The women slaves were nostalgic by the pleasant moments of their lives spent in their native countries. The fear of straying from those unforgettable moments to an unknown destination was unbearable for these female slaves. We see that the slavery that took place in Africa was a deliberate decision by whites to subject the black race to a perpetual state of inferiority, frustration and ridicule through torture and ill-treatment.

Millions of descendants of black slaves became foreigners in foreign countries because of slavery. Some of these people still face different forms of discrimination that their ancestors suffered during the era of slavery. Fortunately, slavery is recognized today as a crime against humanity around the world. It is in this regard that the National Assembly of France adopted the Taubira Law on May 21, 2001. This law recognizes slavery as a crime against humanity. Even though slavery is abolished today, we believe that the descendants of these slaves should be compensated by the countries that perpetrated this crime. It is not about paying for the services of their ancestors but to appease those who still hold the memories of this crime in their hearts.

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