

THE PAINS OF MIDDLE PASSAGE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ÖZET:

1492'den itibaren başlayan Amerika kıtasının Avrupalılar tarafından "keşfi ve kullanılması" dünya tarihi açısından önemli bir gelişme olduğu gibi, tarihin bu önemli değişim döneminde, insan ve dünya kaderini başkalaştıran yoğun ve karmaşık bir toplumbilimsel süreç yaşanmıştır. Kuzey ve Güney Amerika'yı kolonileştiren üç Avrupa ülkesinden İspanya'yla Fransa kalıcı olmayı amaçlamadıkları için, sadece belli bir süre devam eden ticaret bağlantılarıyla yetinmişlerdir ama daha sonra gelen İngilizler, yaklaşık iki yüz elli yıl içinde tüm Kuzey Amerika'ya hakim olup tarıma dayalı bir ekonomiyle New England ve Chesapeake yerleşik kolonilerini kurmuşlardır. Bugünkü Amerikalıların temelini oluşturan bu koloni insanlarına, kısa bir süre içinde Portekizli köle tacirleri tarafından getirilen Afrikalı kara derili insanlar da katılmıştır. 17. yüzyılın başlarında temeli atılmış olan bu iki İngiliz kolonisinde gelişen yerel ticaret, İngiltere/Amerika/Afrika üçgeni içinde büyük bir Atlantik Okyanusu merkantalist ticaret ağına dönüşür. Bu üçgen ağ, aynı zamanda Afrikalı kölelerin de Amerika'ya zorla getirildikleri yolun temeli olmuştur. Pek çok Afrikalının açlık, hastalık ve zor yaşam koşulları yüzünden telef olduğu bu okyanus yolculuğuna *Middle Passage* denmiştir. Bu atlantikötesi köle ticareti 1807'e kadar sürmüştür ama Afrikalı insanın acısı ve ıstırabı sanat eserlerinde, özellikle de edebiyatta somutlaşmıştır. Neredeyse her Afrika kökenli yazarın bir şekilde değindiği Middle Passage'ın acıklı hikayeleri, çağdaş Amerikan edebiyatının iki önemli Afrika kökenli yazarı, August Wilson'ın oyunları ve Nobel Edebiyat Ödüllü Toni Morrison'un romanlarında anlatılır. Bu makalede, Middle Passage diye anılan tarihsel olgudan yola çıkılıp bu köle satış yolculuğunun 20. yüzyıl edebiyatındaki örnekleri incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerika'nın keşfi ve kullanılması, koloni devletleri, merkantalizm, Middle Passage (Orta Tünel/Ara Pasaj) köle pazarı yolu, August Wilson ve Toni Morrison gibi Afrika kökenli Amerikalı yazarlar.

ABSTRACT:

With the "exploration and exploitation" of Americas starting in 1492, the European nations shifted their economic and political strife and competition to the New World. The Spanish who were the first colonizers set up primitive colonies based on the hegemony of their soldiers, the conquistadores. The second European colonizers were the French who conducted fur trade up in the north and along the St. Lawrence river. The English were the third and last colonizers who established permanent colonies based on agriculture. Thus New England and Chesapeake were the first English colonies that became the basis of the modern nation, USA. After the colonization of America by three European nations, African slaves were brought to British North America by the Portuguese slave traders because a transatlantic economic system with England at the top (or centre) as the controlling power needed income and work force. The labor force of the colonies was supplied by African people when the Africans were transported via a sad and painful route called the *Middle Passage*. In this paper, the focus of attention will be on this horrible and nightmarish Atlantic route and on the African-American writers August Wilson and Toni Morrison who recalled the memories of slavery and imparted the effect of slave narratives in their plays and novels.

Keywords: Exploration and exploitation of Americas, colonization, mercantalism, Middle Passage, African-American writers like August Wilson and Toni Morrison.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE EUROPEAN DISCOVERY

Around 1400, Europe came out of the medieval period which is sometimes referred to as the dark ages. In art and in science, Renaissance emerged while nation states began to develop politically. However, the changing conditions in Europe that had affected America the most, were economic and technological. Economically, a merchant class which sought expanded trading opportunities developed. Technologically, the leading European countries like Spain, France, Holland and the newly emerging England were able to search for a direct route to the East because of the improved ship building and navigational techniques. Since the 12th century especially with Marco Polo who travelled to China, traders were able to bring back silk, spices and other luxuries as lucrative business. However the Silk Road was controlled by the Ottomans and Central Asians. We all know from our history books that in an attempt to find a sea-route to the East, Christopher Columbus travelled West and by chance discovered America. Since he thought he had found India he named the inhabitants “Indians.” However it was not until 1499 that Amerigo Vespucci determined that the whole new continent had been discovered.

Starting with the colonization of the American continent, three major European nations explored and exploited the Americas. Columbus was an Italian but he sailed for the Spanish Crown. For that reason, Spain was the first European power to explore the new lands. Columbus was soon followed by the *conquistadores* who were the Spanish soldiers. These soldiers primarily sought gold and riches but in time they set up primitive colonies based on enslaving the native people. The Spanish colonization system, called *encomienda* made way to the exploitation of the gold and to the spreading of Christianity. The Spanish occupied south America and Florida. Under the Spanish, the natives suffered greatly from diseases, especially from small-pox and from genocide. Their culture was destroyed, their temples and cities torn down and their written record burnt. This was the systematic destruction of the Indian culture

(Divine, 19). A second wave of exploration was realized by the French almost a century later. The French tradesmen were accompanied by the religious missionaries called Black Robes by the natives. These religious men taught the Indians European ways, reading, writing, their language and culture. The French objective was similar to the Spanish but their pattern of exploration and settlement was quite different. Since the French explorers settled towards the north (in present day Canada) and because the weather was harsh, they were interested in trading with the Indians for fur to be sold in Europe. Through this cultural communication, the Jesuit missionaries learned the Indian languages and taught them literacy. In general, it can be claimed that the French looked more civilized in their colonization system than the Spanish, but they also brought disease and disruption to the native people.

The third colonizers were the English who were the most successful because their colonial system established strongly with permanent colonies based on agriculture. In almost 150 years, they became Euro-Americans. As a result, the British North America became a nation what is now known as USA. The Spanish and the French colonizers who were either soldiers or tradesmen remained temporarily in Americas but their impact survived all through the next centuries.

The English colonizers who came to the New World had basically two reasons:

1. to flee religious persecution. (Puritans settled in New England and Catholics established their settlement in Maryland)
2. to seek greater economic opportunities. (Merchants migrated to Virginia to trade tobacco. Since the economic conditions in England were bad, these traders could find enthusiastic colonists easily but they had to organize and form joint-stock companies since travel to Americas was expensive.

Besides these economic and religious motivations, a third but underlying reason for the English colonization was political. Starting with the 15th

century onto the 18th, a strong competition developed between European countries to control the New World.

Thus, the early exploration of Americas was part of a hegemonic struggle for power in Europe.

Life in America was hard for the colonists, but ultimately it promised greater freedom and opportunity for the European white man although it caused pain for other races. Thus, three races met in the new continent, the white (Europeans), the red (Indians) and the black (Africans). Besides the natives, the third race of people in the

New World was the Africans but unlike the Indians or Europeans, the Africans were brought to America by the forceful hand of slavery.

II. AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE AND THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

Slavery was an important part of the world economic system at the time of the discovery of America. It was a common feature in Africa and slave trade was mostly controlled by West African Kingdoms of Ghana and Mali. The Arab traders initiated the slave trade to Europe and the Mediterranean but the Spanish, Portuguese and other European traders took up the business of supplying the New World with a labor force. By 1650, 10,000 slaves per year were transported to Americas. From 10 % to 15 % of the slaves died during the *Middle Passage*. About 5 % of the total were shipped to the American colonies. The rest went to Caribbean.

While the colonies were growing and beginning to assert their independence, Africans were transported in large numbers to America. Most of the American slaves, about 95 % went to Caribbean and about 5 % were brought to British North America. The route from West Africa which was called the Middle Passage was of a triangular shape, located among Britain, America and Africa and it was very hard. About 20 % of the slaves died on the way and about 200,000 slaves were shipped to North America where they worked on plantations (Norton, 35).

The British needed slavery because at the beginning of the colonialistic period, the colonies played an active economic role as small outposts but a change arose with the 1600s because Britain started heading the leadership in a big mercantalistic system. According to this economic trade system, the colonies supplied the mother country (Britain) with raw materials and served as market for manufactured goods. For about hundred and fifty years, Britain tried to control trade so that she could collect custom duties from the colonies.

The British started to control the North American trade with a number of navigation acts and hence, they established a transatlantic economic system at the beginning of the 17th century. This economic system can be viewed as a triangle with England at the top as the controlling force. Raw materials flowed from North America to England, while fruit and wine came from West Africa via Spain and Portuguese. In exchange, England exported the manufactured goods.

With this established economic system of the 17th century, the Englishmen introduced slavery which turned into human trade named Middle Passage. The first Africans were brought to the British North American colonies in 1619 and towards the second half of the 17th century, the slave trade organization was totally part of the system. A joint stock company held a monopoly on this trade in 1672 and brought 120,000 slaves to England's American colonies. According to these slave traders, a falling birthrate and unimproved economic conditions in England decreased the number of migrants to the colonies. When the shortage became acute, import of Africans increased. Besides, it was difficult to enslave the natives because they could easily escape since they knew the land and environment very well.

III. AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

African-American literature is the product of white America and African folk tales. The sorts of African folk tales are numerous and colorful as: animal and bird stories, old marster and John, colored man and white man, hoodoos and

two-heads, spirits and hants, witches and mermaids, the lord and the devil, wonders, horrors, protest tales, scare tales, fool tales, lying tales, preachers, etc. In his introductory note to the *American Negro Folktales*, Richard M. Dorson compares and contrasts European tales with African-American ones as follows: “One of the memorable bequests by the negro to American civilization is his rich and diverse store of folktales. This body of oral narratives took form on Southern plantations during the dark days of slavery and has expanded and traveled north on the lips of colored people in the last hundred years. By contrast, the white population has integrated no firm tradition of ethnic folktales. Ever since the Grimm brothers in 1812 first revealed the abundance of European peasant stories, the folklorists of every country in Europe have enjoyed a succession of field days. But no Grimm have made their appearance, or can appear, in Uncle Sam’s America” (Dorson, 12). Dorson continues with his argument stating that the colonizing Englishmen had some sort of folk stories of witches, ghosts and the devil but that they did not have magical fictions.

Middle Passage was just a beginning for the African-Americans. Their existence and representation during the first years of the colonies was not questioned or defined but was neglected as a matter that remained vague for some time. With their labor and hard work on the plantations and after the South attained wealth through cotton, the economic structure of the USA changed since one-crop agricultural economy had advantages (and sometimes disadvantages) in the new emerging economic system.

However, with the 19th century, the issue of slavery was becoming problematic for the North and for the whole nation. Most important of all, slavery was a notorious and black mark on American democracy, when viewed from a universal perspective. On a national basis, the Cotton South was becoming powerful politically and was forcing the new attained southern states

to be accepted as slave-states. The industrial North was frowning upon these issues and felt the need to avoid further problems based on the issue of slavery.

American history has a period of time when the most important political issue was the conflict and question of slavery, slave-states and the civil war. During this period, there were a number of white American writers who wrote novels, poetry and short stories based on white American life along with the African-Americans in the narrative.

For instance, the American classic *Huckleberry Finn* revolves around the two important characters, the white boy Huckleberry Finn and the African slave Jim. The author of the novel who was praised by the fourteenth president of the USA Abraham Lincoln for her narrative on the civil war was Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is again one of the American classics which exposes the social, economic and cultural atmosphere of the antebellum South. Thus, American literary canon is full of the narratives based on the slavery matter. Likewise, African-American literature concentrates mostly on the African-American identity, on African-American experience and on the issue of slavery. A lot of themes and issues have depth into this sociological event. Yet, a classification is possible as: i. slave narratives, ii. narrative memories based on slavery or those that deal with the outcome of this issue.

III. 1. Slave narrative as a genre of the abolitionist movement to dispel the myths of the pro-slavery argument

A slave narrative became a genre created just for the American slaves as the ex-slaves narrated their true life stories during their life. Some examples are: a narrative of the uncommon sufferings and surprizing of Briton Hammon, Gustava Vassa's life in Eboe, Frederick Douglass's narrative of life, a narrative of some remarkable incidents in the life of Soloman Bayley, Narrative of the life of Henry "Box" Brown, the narrative of the life and

adventures of Henry Bibb, a narrative of the adventures and escape of Moses Raper, etc.

Although it is an autobiographical account, the fresh memories of slavery were written down during the time of slavery when the issues were still on the agenda or clear in the minds. It was the political voice of the abolitionist movements of the 19th century. John Hope Franklin says “Negroes did not invent American autobiography.

There are examples of it in early colonial America. The slave narratives were, however, a very special kind of autobiographies that were not only apologies for their authors existence, but also arguments against the kind of existence to which they had been subjected. Nor can it be successfully argued that white abolitionists were the originators of the slave narrative as a literary form or that they were the ghost writers of all of them. In the late eighteenth century, long before the Garrisons and the Whittiers had begun even to consider assuming an abolitionist posture, Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustava Vassa, the African, had written his own narrative. And it was Vassa who first effectively used the events of a slave’s life as the basis for attacking slavery and the slave trade. A half-century later, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, whom no one would seriously suggest as having used ghost writers, would continue to set forth in the narratives of their own lives the philosophical and practical arguments against human bondage (Miller, xvii).

III. 2. August Wilson and the impact of the Middle Passage in his work:

The African-American dramatist August Wilson who was born and raised in a black slum in Pittsburg in 1945 has a close interest in the past history of African slavery. He was surely brought up with the stories of slavery and besides this, he most probably went through the pressures of being the child of a white father and a black mother. In an interview, August Wilson formulates two choices for African-Americans: either to assimilate into the white

American society and lose African roots or to protect the African culture separately and remain as Africans rather than blacks who have adopted European values. When asked about his ideas on history and how he uses it as material, August Wilson explains his ideas as follows: “We’re leftovers from history-history that happened when there was a tremendous need for manual labor, when cotton was king.

But history and life progress, you move into the industrial age, and now we’re moving into the computer age. We’re left over. We’re no longer needed. At one time we were very valuable to America- free labor” (Savran, 1988: 295). He is very sure that the history is something that belongs to the past and that they have to move on. Yet the African heritage should be remembered. “His search for the roots of black cultural identity has led him to the black oral tradition that helped usher in the blues singing of Bessie Smith, who was, ironically, a contemporary of the real-life Ma. Though a man of mixed race, Wilson identifies with the black ancestry of his mother. This identification has focused his art. In the core of his mind and being, he is a black man who understands the hurdles black America most surmount before doing justice to its legacy” (Wolfe, 1999: 4)

Wilson’s woman characters are not like men, i.e. they are strong and in favor of new horizons but they are forced to be submissive. This is true for Ma Rainey, although she is not the leading character in the play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Harry J. Elam, Jr states that Wilson “presents independent women who assert feminist positions, but who, either through their own volition or as the result of external social pressures, ultimately conform to traditional gender roles and historical expectations” (Nadel, 1994: 165).

August Wilson’s play *The Piano Lesson* is based on the conflict between past (revealing itself on the event to come) and future. The piano becomes the leitmotif of the African-American heritage and of the wealth it may convey to the young people of the 1930s. Although the narrative time of the play is the

post-Depression era, the story and the meaning of the piano represents the pain of the Middle Passage and the possibility of a fresh start paid to this antique on its sale. Although the depression was becoming stabilized with 1930s, it was nevertheless a difficult time for the African-Americans.

The Piano Lesson was written in 1986 and it was first produced in 1988. The play brought August Wilson his second Pulitzer Prize after the *Fences*. In the play, the African-American Charles family has doubts and pains about the piano since they trace the story of their family as they discuss the sale of it. Their ancestors Mama Berniece and her nine year old son were sold out for this piano and they had gone through a painful time because of African slave trade. On the other hand, after five generations, slavery was over legally but Boy Willie and Berniece were having a hard time earning a living. Once the piano was sold, the money it brought would comfort them but the question was whether to remember the past or not. The main conflict of the play arises when men want to sell the piano and visit Berniece to force her into the sale and to plan to use the money to buy the old Sutter land which was the plantation their parents had lived on for centuries. On the one hand, the land demonstrates their ancestral labor, whereas the piano is the creation of the family history. The characters have to decide on achieving the American dream through two binary oppositions: owning the land or the artifact. Boy Willie believes that he can gain respect and spiritual freedom as a black man by buying the land in the south where their African roots lie. On the contrary Berniece tries to keep her grandmothers tears on the piano as she had polished it.

However the ghosts of the slavery past free the characters at the end of the play, when August Wilson blends the opposing binaries. Wilson prefers a compromise of African past and American future. For example in another play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson puts African religious traditions and woodoo rituals side by side with American Christianity. Sandra D. Shamon believes that Wilson's "mission is not so much to challenge the past to bring it

once again into focus to exemplify for today's audiences how African-Americans emerged triumphant. The importance of history, then, is as a way of knowing the present world and of predicting and shaping the future.

Ultimately Wilson becomes a mythmaker" (Shannon, 1995: 5)

III. 3. Toni Morrison and the Middle Passage memories in her novels

Contemporary African-American writers tend to focus their work on the painful days of slavery in order to keep the memories of this period fresh in the minds of people. For instance, the recent works such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) have either direct reference to the Middle Passage or indirectly demonstrate the social and historical events on the plantations after the nightmarish sea-route during the colonial years and in the first decades of the new republic.

Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*, creates stories about the time of slavery, constructing a historical background on her racial views. In the plot, Sethe kills her baby daughter in order to save her from slavery but this dead daughter returns to her in flesh and forces Sethe to remember her past. In this way, her tragic denial becomes a remembered memory and at the end, she gains peace as she remembers the forgotten.

The daughter named Beloved in a way reminds her mother of her sin and at the same time frees her of the burden of it. Beloved's coming from the river is a reference to the Middle Passage where millions of Africans had died and the survivors had stories of it.

Beloved causes pain but this is the agony of the collective unconscious. Sethe's two daughters hear the stories of the African past along with all the Africans because it is their existence and this existence must always remain fresh. Consequently, Beloved brings the painful past as Denver projects the future.

In this way, Toni Morrison digs into the individual and collective memories of the African-Americans. Through the use of memory she constructs and reconstructs the slave narrative genre and keeps the African past alive. Her reasons for such a narrative strategy is as follows:

1. As the voice of the African-Americans, Morrison initiates a rebellion against the traditional ideas.
2. Constructing and reconstructing memory is a burst out of silence and of hidden feelings.
3. Memory is a way of the storage of the oral storytelling of the woodoo tradition.
4. The memorization skill and habit ties the Africans to their roots.
5. Memory and imagination are blended in such a way to construct new stories. However, the stories remain subjective and stable.

At the end of the novel, the order in the cosmos and the integration and wholeness of African-Americans are attained through Sethe's memories. Her memories as a woman, as a mother and as an African are restored since she was silenced and had no chance to write her memories down for the African slaves were prohibited from literacy.

Besides using memory as a literary tool, Morrison tears down the conventional narrative traditions and replaces it with a spiraling, unfinished and many-voiced story. In other words, the linear, progressive and mono-logic narrative line is deconstructed. In addition to this, with Morrison's use of the multivoiced narration to present the memories, the narrative becomes a story observed from lots of angles, instead of presenting a unified voice. In her article "A Different Remembering: Memory, History, and Meaning in *Beloved*" Marilyn Sanders Mobley states that the novel was more than a slave narrative: "In a larger sense, however, it is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a 'reaccentuation' of the past (in this case, the past of slavery) to discover newer aspects of meaning embedded in the classic slave narrative. Morrison's

purpose is not to convince white readers of the slave's humanity, but to address black readers by inviting us to the very part of our past that many have repressed, forgotten or ignored" (Gates/Appiah, 363)

IV. CONCLUSION

Three European countries and three races had met after the exploration and exploitation of the New World after 1492. As a projection of the European competition for trade and commerce, Spain, France and England established colonies in Americas during the 16th and 17th centuries. The Spanish soldiers called conquistadores and the French fur traders together with Jesuit missionaries set up primitive colonies based on temporary settlements but the English were the most successful colonizers since they established permanent colonies based on agriculture. Consequently, the European nations set foot on Americas where the natives (Indians) had arrived and founded pueblo villages centuries ago. With the establishment of the English colonies New England and Chesapeake, African slave trade provided the important labor force instead of the indentured servants. The triangular transportation route of the Africans was horrible and nightmarish, however this sea route called Middle Passage has become a colorful and rich material for the African Americans. At the beginning writers like Frederick Douglass were recording their first-hand stories and memories which were later called slave narratives. Apart from the direct references to the issues of Middle Passage and slavery, a lot of the African-American novels and plays show the aftermath of the nightmarish sea route and tell the story of the Americanization on a new and foreign land.

The contemporary African-American writer August Wilson focuses on the effects of the Middle Passage in his plays because he thinks generations are separated by cultural breakdown and that black experience should be remembered. In other words it is important to discover and remind the African-American people of their identity.

Although he was a cultural nationalist in the 1960s, towards the end of the century Wilson tries to balance Africanism with Americanisms in his plays. On the other hand, Toni Morrison prefers novel as her literary medium. Morrison writes about the narratives of the remembrances in order to make the African past remembered and reconstructed. While using post-modern techniques, she makes the plot line move back and forth in time and shows the reader the reality from various perspectives. Since the African folk tales are full of fantastic elements, she makes her characters live in a magical reality.

African-American themes, stories and characters are in many ways similar because of the interest of African-Americans in their African heritage and in the process of integrating into the white American society. In the novels or plays of African-American dramatist and novelists, there is usually a conflict between Africanness and Americanness and at the end harmony is attained with the blending of both. Most of the plays or novels have strong ties to the African past and the aftermath of the Middle Passage.

According to the historical time of the narrative, the problems and the issues that the characters confront vary, as they rise up the social ladder or attempt to change their social classes. For example the characters of 1800s are slaves whereas those of the 1920s are struggling under the economic hardships of the share-cropping system. The African-Americans of the 1950s are seen as individuals fighting to reach middle class and trying to attain American dream. However with 1970s and 1980s, the upper middle class African-Americans started to play an important role in the narratives.

The contemporary African-American writers bind the African oral tradition of voodoo and folk tales with the reality of the Middle Passage and at the same time, negotiate the past with the present, the African with the American and the personal with the communal. In this way they remember the imprisoned and repressed emotional memory.

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