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## **NARRATIVES OF THE OTHER SPACES: REDEFINED HETEROTOPIAS AND SUBVERTED BIOPOWER**

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### **Abstract**

The formulaic beginnings of most tales, “Once upon a time in a far away land” clearly cautions the readers that the story is allegorical to the social and political structures those survive in the real world. The characters there venture to make us believe their existence. But with the coming of the post colonial narratives, artists have challenged perspectives and have offered reverse perspectives yet learning, challenging and redefining histories and maintaining the multiplicity and solidarity of the race. They function in a politically defined space of the ‘Other’ while surviving the Western biopower. The paper focuses on two women writers of color- Harriet E. Wilson and Harriet Ann Jacobs and their autobiographies- ‘Our Nig’ (1859) and ‘Incidents’ (1861) respectively to trace how heterotopia works in the said narratives and the process these artists adopt to directly confront (or escape through deception) their socio-politically designated space (heterotopia) and the use of hegemonic community politics to suppress the blacks (biopower). These narratives flaunt more of historicity and although the details vary owing to literary multiplicity, their clear defined space announces solidarity and enriches concepts of selfhood, history and literature. The artists have themselves suffered the socio- political techniques used by the West to subjugate bodies- ‘Biopower’ as Michael Foucault calls, yet most of their narrative end in a sort of spiritual emancipation of their fictive Black selves. As a creative non- fiction, autobiographies are a way of writing personal history and then attaining solidarity. These writings focus on a series of binary oppositions- Orient/ Occident, Black/ White, man/ woman, slavery/ freedom etc. and attempt to dilute these social dichotomies. Their narratives end in two possibilities: a) subversion and journeying back from their heterotopic places and b) release and possess a material reality within that heterotopy.

### **Key-Words**

Black female, Autobiographies, heterotopia, biopower, binary opposition, post-colonial literature, solidarity

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**Vol. 3 Issue 4 (August 2017)**

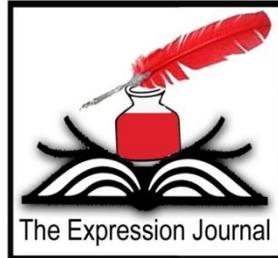
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### **Introduction:**

*Beloved* (1987), a novel by Toni Morrison, has its epigraph as 'Sixty Million and more'. History of human evolution (if at all we have evolved, ever!) has no dearth of instances where the beast within us has been cruelly let loose. The colonial and post-colonial artists of color have always striven to expose the voice of the voiceless- the African women across the globe- those have cried aloud, through pen or action, for emancipation, about what beauty means to them, about discovering that is it merely the physical beauty that makes a difference (if at all it makes) or the beauty of being free. The practice of slavery has long gone, but the traces in the mind of the race still shine out clear! But how do people get to read about it? Through published books and school syllabi etc.. Stover Jhonnie in his book *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* says that it was only after late 1960s that these subaltern writings created place for themselves in schools and universities syllabi: "If we were to use those pre-1964 curricula as defining markers of the "greatest writers"...we would have to conclude that there were no great African American women writers in the nineteenth century and that slave narratives and African American autobiography do not constitute important literary genres" (Jhonnie, 9). The situation would have remained the same and these slave narratives and voices would be placed outside the social paradigm of the white- heterosexual- male if these writings were kept away from the education system permanently. Not just education, it is expressed in the Black women narratives that they have suffered worse plights and restrictions facing the white biopower, than black men; "(they) have faced greater economic discrimination and had fewer employment opportunities than did Black men. Black women's work was the most undesirable and least remunerative of all work available to migrants" (Hine, 913). In all the autobiographies we discover them suffer economically as well.

It is soundly evident from the autobiography of Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig: or, Sketches from*

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*the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North*, which was originally published in 1859 but was only re-discovered in 1981. *Our Nig* is first novel published by an African-American woman in North America (Editor's Introduction) and it helped present a new and distinct American narrative form and thwarting attempts to keep the women of color in, what Foucault defines, heterotopia. We have to discover how these women felt and placed themselves in these spatial territories through their narratives whose aim was never ever to make money,

(They) did not write for the sake of economical concerns...(their) main concern was to pull the attention of her readers to the harsh , brutal, demeaning conditions slaves, and especially the women slaves, were exposed to during those years" (Tanritanir, 1)

## **What are Foucault's ideas of Heterotopia and Biopower?**

Michel Foucault in his *Of Other Spaces* (1967) establishes a few ideas in defining, or rather re-defining, our notions of space: utopia and heterotopia. They are linked to each other and simultaneously opposite to each other. While utopia is an unreal space, an imaginary world, heterotopia is both real and mythical. According to Foucault, all cultures are heterotopias and they are further divided into two parts: Places that are sacred and forbidden (like honeymoon sites and other places) which Foucault together calls crisis heterotopias and secondly, places those do not conform to norms and regulations (like prison cells, hospitals – mental or otherwise, hammams etc.) which he calls deviation heterotopias. My paper does not dive into the conceptual study of the differences between the two, but restrict the general meaning of heterotopia that applies to the sub- culture of the Black Americans (or otherwise, just Blacks).

For the white society (that aims at achieving utopia by restricting whites to their defined spaces by the use of biopower), heterotopia is an imaginary place/ space outside the main society (that produced it, i.e. of the whites) and carrying a relation with it at the same time. While utopia is purely imaginary, heterotopia exists whenever and where ever sub- culture exists (sub- culture is out of the purview of the discussion, though intricately related in the culture of heterotopia) and so possesses a material reality. Utopia is achieved through the presence of heterotopia and this is an important point to be noted, for it forms the undercurrent of biopower. Foucault gives an example of mirror in this regard. He assumes a) oneself to be reality, b) one's reflection in the mirror as utopia, and c) the mirror to be heterotopia. Since this point confuses most, an elaborate explanation can be given. Just like a glass of tap water, unfiltered. This tap water is society or reality. Now, this society wishes to achieve purity and perfection. So it needs a way to filter out and do away with the 'Undesirable' elements (like criminals are kept in prisons to keep the society untainted) and for that a *medium* is required. The filtering machine is that *medium*. Similarly, Foucault calls that mirror the *medium* to reflect utopia. This heterotopia operates all the times by way of racial biopower.

Along with the heterotopic issues, biopower against the poor black women was mainly expressed through group/ repeated rapes, threat of rapes, forced child bearings, physical beating and social outcastism:

The combined influence of rape (or the threat of rape), domestic violence, and economic oppression is key to understanding the hidden motivations informing major social protest

Vol. 3 Issue 4 (August 2017)

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and migratory movements in Afro-American history (Hine, 913).

Women have used autobiographies as modes of expression of their twentieth century slave narratives. Some writers like Harriet Wilson use the form of sentimental novel, others like Maya Angelou use autobiographical fiction to redefine perspective and explore/ challenge their social spaces. This has helped these women to distance themselves from their own experiences of tortures and have pleasantly narrated their colonial and post colonial discourses. Moreover, the use of third person point of view helped these writers distance themselves and present their subjective perspectives irrespective to whether or not they redefined the racial status quo. They have tried to reconstruct this geography of urban space and in this regard,

“Black South African fiction and autobiographies (are) sources of valuable information for the study of social relations and daily life in Black townships and locations... Black townships are “terra incognita” (incognitive territory) and Black literature therefore proves useful to construct what he calls “mind portrayals” in an urban environment and literature has great potential for conveying the sensate and unimagined or darkly expressed essence of urbanism” (Samin).

## **Defined Spaces in *Our Nig***

In the Preface to *Our Nig*, Wilson says that Frado is the “transaction in my own life.” (Krupova, 12) and though Wilson calls the novel a sentimental one, Aneta Krupova observes that it is not appropriate to label *Our Nig* a sentimental novel because Wilson departs from the use of a happy ending:

“she departs from one of the major features of this fiction: its conclusion is not in accordance with the conventions of the sentimental novel, because her story does not end happily. Although the novel’s heroine gets married, the marriage fails to provide for her and her child.” (Krupova, 13)

Wilson’s story is about the physical abuse of Frado and how she struggles all through her life to challenge perspectives and redefine ‘her space’ in America. For women of color, valuing and finding their own voice was an imperative step in writing their autobiography. Since they have always been silent beings, restrained and submitted by the white biopower, “the black women decided to express their resistance through language” (Krupova, 10). Frado’s initiation against this submission starts when she decides to stand up against its antagonist Mrs. Bellmont. The novel begins with the story of Mag Smith who bears a child out of wed- lock and who dies shortly after birth. She moves away to some place that she feels comfortable in and reluctantly marries Jim with whom she mothers two children- the protagonist Frado and a son. After Jim’s death, Mag marries Seth who is a business partner of Jim and the couple decides to send Frado to Bellmonts’ which is a white family. Episodes of racial outcastism begin at Bellmonts’ house. Frado is made to perform domestic chores like working in the kitchen, doing dishes, preparing food, etc. she faces both acceptance and resistance at the hands of Bellmonts’ children. Frado shares a comfortable space and emotional bond with Fida, a dog Jack buys her.

A major episode of racial inferiority happens when Frado runs away from the Bellmonts’ house and is searched down by Mr. Bellmont and his sons. She hates God for making her dark and complaints of her complexion and a feeling of a “misfit” in the white family/ world. This provides a re- look on the complete title of the novel that reiterates the pivotal theme of heterotopia, where

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whites like Mrs. Belmont ensures Frado's physical restriction to household chores. Wilson's complete title to *Our Nig* is 'Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two- Story White House, North, Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall even There'. Whites have developed a social perspective that uses biopower to contain black to their designated and 'hegemonically' defined heterotopias and this is reflected through the treatment of Frado.

She suffers beatings and threats from Mrs. Belmont about "cutting her tongue" if she ever complains to anybody. Mrs. Belmont is one of those Wilson's characters that showed a typical aversion to the growth of the people (especially women) of color, for it was very dangerous for the master to have a literate slave. The reason proves why it was not only tough, nearly impossible, for the slaves to learn education, but even the slave- laws restricted creation of a *literate slave space*: "The acquisition of literacy meant for a slave a degree of self-sufficiency." (Krupova, 11). Furthermore, Mrs. Belmont wants to blacken Frado more in order to make the latter best fit in the space Belmont thinks she deserves.

On James's deteriorating health, Frado grows emotionally fond of reading Bible and attends the evening meetings at the Church. Mrs. Belmont detests this, as discussed above;

Mrs. Belmont has a deep aversion to her being literate: "I found her reading the Bible today, just as though she expected to turn pious nigger, and reach to white folks", and for this reason she puts an end to her education. (Krupova, 11).

James dies and Fredo is devastated for losing the only solace she had in Bellmonts' family. She feels the need of seeking a spiritual aid which she finds in Aunt Abby who is Mr. Belmont's sister. These scenes in the novel emphasize the physical brutalities Frado endures whilst her stay at the Bellmonts'. Mrs. Bellmonts call her "our nig", they transform her into a racialized object, into a lower being than the other servants because she is totally under Mrs. Bellmont's control. Mrs. Bellmont wants to profit from Frados toil and thus views the torturing as only means of beating "the money out of her." (Krupova, 17)

Aunt Abby insists Frado to resist and show assertion towards Mrs Bellmont's whippings. Unexpectedly, Mrs. Bellmont relents and recedes in her behavior and beats her less frequently. At one particular moment, Wilson's Frado realizes her being and asserts her 'power' of existence: "realizes her power and her worth as a laborer:

"Stop! shouted Frado, "strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you"; and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts" (Krupova, 10).

It is only when Frado starts asserting her existence out loud and clear, it marks the beginning of her spiritual transformation. It is Frado's lack of choices that deter her running away and exploring other alternatives of living. Later Frado is employed by a woman in Massachusetts and she survives on a feeble wage. Years later she marries Samuel who has been a slave, now freed. She discovers that her back suffers more marks of beatings by Mrs. Bellmont than the slavery marks Samuel's back carries. The novel traces the struggle Frado faces during all these years and how she brings her baby up all by herself searching for financial and social space:

"Frado's awakened speaking voice signifies her consciousness of herself as a subject. With the act of speaking alone, Frado assumes a large measure of control over the choices she

can possibly make each day.” (Krupova, 10)

Complexion has played the most important role in ‘coming handy’ to assert the biopower over this dark race. Mrs. Belmont in one of the episodes cut Frado’s hair off exposing her skin burn more in the sun. Though she is not many shades darker than Belmont’s own daughter Mary, but Mrs. Belmont strives to keep the color chasm clearly apart:

“Because it was the physical features, such as the skin color and the hair texture which defined a black person as a slave (or a servant) and a white person as his/ her master. Frado’s blackness has legitimized the required physical labor and has authorized the white people to abuse her verbally and physically.” (Krupova, 17).

Like a prison cell that the White ‘utopian’ society creates to put the undesirable people into, the Bellmonts in *Our Nig* represents that white section of society that has creates heterotopic jobs and engagements to keep the blacks from the whites and thereby maintaining the social chastity of the whites. Mrs. Belmont argues in the novel comparing the nigs to black snakes. She believes it is practically okay to restrict blacks to toil in the rice swamps regardless of the effect upon the health of the niggers. Other jobs included indentured servants like Frado is, of the Bellmonts’, “free black children were frequently indentured, and race was a crucial factor in delineating the class status of American household servants.” (Krupova, 19). Even in that case, Mrs. Belmont resolves that she will “beat the money out of her.” (19).

The cry for retaliation becomes intense all the more for the women because none of neutral people like Mr. Belmont, Jack etc. offer her any solace against Mrs. Belmont's whippings. In one of the episodes, Frado laments her existence:

“...why was I made? why can’t I die? Oh, what I to live for? No one cares form me only to get my work. And I fee l sick; who cares for that? Work as long as I can stand, and then fall down and lay there till I can get up. No mother, no father, brother or sister to care for me, and then it is, You lazy nigger, lazy nigger – all because I am black.” (Krupova, 20)

Niggers were restricted to a space where there exists no religion and therefore no trust, a Christ- less world. Lady Belmont’s hatred stems out of this racial psychology that prohibited blacks to enjoy religion for religion catered to the civilized. Thus she says “religion was not meant for niggers” (21). So the ‘White House’ becomes the utopian world where the blacks exist but in a prison like space, objectified and robotized using the white biopower.

### **Defined Spaces in ‘Incidents’**

Like in *Our Nig*, the social structure of the white society are also predicated and racially defined in Harriet Ann Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacob's writing had always taken strongly on white supremacy and male domination (the latter is out of the purview of this paper). The book had lost its voice only to be recovered later in 1970s and 1980s noting that the work was different from the other slave narratives. Like a typical Black autobiography, this "female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape" (Hine, 912). The protagonist Linda slowly realizes the social dynamics of racism when she comes of age.

Born in a well off slave family, Linda is a happy young child. Upon the death of her mother, she understands the social perception of slavery. At the age of six she is sent to her aunt (mother's

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mistress) who further bequeaths Linda to her relative. Her new masters are heartless and she is driven into a sexual relation at her puberty and she finds the solution to this in entering into a relation with the neighbor- Sands. The urban space of slavery is reconstructed in *Incidents* where Jacobs shows the children of slaves are slaves essentially by law. Slavery has always operated on these imaginary spatial configurations that have further condensed racism. It describes bond of motherhood and abandonment, the quest for freedom, pain, physical and emotional suffering, community support and family loyalty:

"Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrists; could you have heard her heart –rending groans, and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly bleeding for mercy; could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, Slavery is damnable" (Tanritanir, 1)

Jacobs represents this through Linda's desperate attempts to break free from the fields when she discovers her own children also forced into laboring on the fields. Dr. Flint, the white man uses Linda's black roots and her poverty to his advantage to conform her to the slavish space by exploiting her service on the fields. Linda's "ambivalent" existence is depicted by her stringent desire to be around their children, faking a fleeing to the North, Linda hides herself in her Aunt Martha's attic. Jacob has shown, like in all other black autobiographies, the relentless fight against the white biopower through education, plotting or a clear cut deception even at the cost of enduring an existential instability and shakiness:

"Black writers have explored the combination of the themes of fragmentation and correlated precariousness and poverty by transforming the representation of the conditions of life... into a metaphor of existential ambivalence." (Samin)

Linda suffers a physical debilitation in the attic of Aunt Maria which is small enough to barely lay down, she can neither sit or stand. Years later she decides to flee to the North though it is still too risky because Dr. Flint's hunt is still on. Her two children- Benny and Ellen are the only world she confines her life to, again a representative social- structure most women of color described, be it Maya Angelou's autobiography, Morrison's narratives, Alice Walker's writings, Wilson's autobiography and many more. Ellen is traded into Mr. Sands's cousin Mr. Hobbs where his treatment is like a typical slave to whose discovery Linda is dismayed.

The theme of heterotopia and attempts to escape the racial social spaces continue throughout the novel. Linda's continuous obsession to free herself and her kinds from slavery pushes her for numerous attempts. At Boston, she is reunited with Benny and Dr. Flinch claims that the kids' sale was illegitimate. Linda is frightened fearing that they shall be enslaved again by Dr. Flinch. It is only a year she spent at her employer Mrs. Bruce, post the latter's death, taking care of her girl child when she enjoys freedom from the racist physical and mental subjection. After Mr. Flint's death, it is now Emily, his daughter who claims the possession of this slave family. The novel mentions the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 making Linda and her children very vulnerable of re- enslavement. The novel ends on a happy note with the new Mrs. Bruce buying their freedom. Linda's struggle for making a home with her children continues. Linda is Harriet Jacobs herself in the novel. 19<sup>th</sup> century female slave narratives always carried ample references to the reality of multiple rapes and physical violence (as mentioned in the introduction). The theme of rapes,

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domestic violence, animalist and unfair treatment from their masters is a common observation in their works. Darlene Hina, in her article *Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West*, observes that there was socially designated heterotopia in employment and women were subjected to certain jobs:

Alan H. Spear pointed out that (they were) limited in their search for desirable positions. Clerical work was practically closed to them and only a few could qualify as school teachers. Negro domestics often received less than white women for the same work and they could rarely rise to the position of head servant in large households (Hina, 913).

Through these Black American narratives, these women have attempted to bring to limelight their struggles and have somewhat alleviated their dreariness through catharsis in these pages. At their own personal levels all the Blacks (women specially) have "brought along a whiff of the vast and free world outside and fuelled the imagination of urban Africans who jibbed at the idea of being trapped within the confines of a white-imposed African culture". The urban landscapes are 'other places' and they exist "in the founding of society (and)... other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted". (Samin). Women knew they were powerless to subvert this constricted and racial space, so they opted to run away and risking their lives and those of their children, like Linda does in *Incidents*, Seathe does in *Beloved* hoping an "elusive sexual freedom for themselves and freedom from slavery for their children" (Hine, 914) and displaying a space of "paradoxically pen - closed spaces which are also spaces of illusion and deception (as discussed above)" (Samin). These women who wrote autobiographies were themselves sexual hostages and victims of severe violence- domestic and otherwise- reduced to racial spaces. At the same time they did not lose their tenacity to emerge as agents of re- defining spatial politics or, in some cases peacefully finding solace in this heterotopia.

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