



## Representation of Slavery in Moby Dick

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### Abstract:

*Moby Dick* resonates with Ahab's chase of the whale which stimulates the spiritual quest, revenge, and emerging industrialization in America. It has designed the idea of a relationship between nature and human beings. Ahab manipulates his crewmates only to take revenge from the white whale that took off his leg in the previous sail. But through this insight of chase, Melville has explored the harsh situation of slavery in early America. He has portrayed the condition of slaves by figuring the characters in a contrary position. Melville, along with, used the colours to introduce different aspects of slaves and slavery in America while the settlement. This paper evaluates Melville's effort to picturise the socio-cultural and psychological condition of the slaves during the early settlement of America. This study would enable to know the idea of "how the theme of entrapment and the liberation of the slaves' substantiates the notions of the self-reliance and American dream while demonstrating the history of America".

### Key Words: Slavery, Representation, History, Moby Dick

Slavery in America estimated the literary canon and it was beautifully formed as an adoption, self-realization and an effort to liberation from cruel masters. This tradition of the liberation of the slaves from their cruel master gave an insight to Melville who has employed this in the figuration of Captain Ahab and Ismael the narrator and Moby Dick the whale. *Moby Dick* (1851) a masterwork by Herman Melville, incorporated the problem of slavery which was one of the dilemmas of American settlers. This paper is an attempt to decode the authorial intention to portray Ismael and Ahab in such a contradictory decorum. Apart from this, it would be evaluating "how Ishmael incarnated the free slave culture" as at the end of the novel, we find the narrator was the only survivor who was rescued and because of him, the whole narration could be possible. Moreover, it entails Melville's usage of colours which premises his notion of slavery.

*Moby Dick* in its literary attitude has dealt with wealth, power, violence, struggle, multi-ethnicity and most important slavery which was surmounted by most of the critical arguments. TW McKeown has argued that Ahab fuels the violence in *Moby Dick*. Michael C. Berthold in "*Moby-Dick* and American Slave Narrative" explores Melville's engagement with slavery in America. He points out that *Moby Dick* has embedded what Hortense Spiller calls "a potential configuration of slavery discursive field" (31). Philbrick in "In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex" sketches captain Ahab as a "demagogue blinded by his profane quest. (2000:08) Ahab manipulates his crew into squandering both his investors' funds and their lives to satisfy his immoral agenda which was to pilot his ship toward a doomed conflict with a murderous, uncontrollable, unstoppable monster which is variously interpreted as nature, God, fate and, on a particular level to the history of slavery in the United States. He pronounces commandingly "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me". (2012:32) Ahab's portrayal in such an arrogant frame by the author graced him in a fascistic attitude. As we already got to know that Ahab has been deformed by his first encounter with the evil that had dragged him down to his death. His vision caricatures the situation of slaves in the early settlement of America. Because of his immoral

vengeance, he exploited all the human and material resources. Through this vision, Melville decides to intimate, examining the intricacies of the tattoos on a savage's leg and, sometimes, exalted. Rosenwald Mark opines "The treatment of the slave in the United States and the humanity of slaves included sexual abuses, rape, the denial of education and punishment like whippings, families were often split up by the sale of one or more members, usually never to see or hear of each other". (2019:29)

Melville has figured Ahab to represent the differences between the natives and settlers due to the variations in their ethnicities. Ishmael's description of Ahab's colour as solid bronze, face as tawny, and torso as an Egyptian chest associates him as Black who belongs to Africa. Ishmael describes him as a "black terrific Ahab", a "dark Ahab." Melville's most interesting portrayal of Ahab seems through the exploration of Ahab's psychological status which proves Ahab's engagement with the black. When Ahab while thumping whalebone's leg keeps Stubb awake and orders him in order to humiliate "Down, dog, and kennel". His defiance of God also projects him as the black. He speaks as if it is an object of his divine hate. In the same way, in early American settlement, many blacks realized that God was not the God of love and that slaveholders and slave-condoning churches were pleasing to him. Melville has portrayed Ahab's attitude in a similar way which baptizes him with slavery and racial discrimination. Ahab's defiance resonates one more characteristic of slavery. Melville has presented his disobedience dramatically as the powerless black man demanding respect and acknowledgement from a white Christian creator. Melville has lined his image as solid bronze, dark, and black. Ahab's such image bears slaves' overtone in his name, the Biblical Ahab having scorned God and chosen Baal as his master.

Slavery, although not discussed explicitly in the novel, is criticized subtly in a parallel of the industries of whaling and slavery. Ishmael's cry plentifully or playfully expresses the textual; and human centrality of enslavement. Ishmael resonances:

"Who aren't a slave? Tell me that... However the old -sea captains may order me about- however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right" that everybody is else one way or other way served in much the same way either in a physical or metaphysical point of view" . (2013: 23-24)

While his narrative, Ishmael is interested in deploying slavery which can be traced in his attempt to segregate himself from Queequeg aboarding the New Bedford to Nantucket. Ishmael associates atrocities with whiteness and finds something lurking "in the innermost idea of this hue [whiteness], which strikes more panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood". (2009:252)

Slavery and forced labour can be traced in Colonial America when the English arrived and established a permanent settlement at Jamestown in 1607. English colonists exploited Virginian Indians—especially Indian children—for much of the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Some colonists largely ignored Virginia laws prohibiting the enslavement of Indian children, which the Virginia Assembly passed in the 1650s and again in 1670.

The race-based slavery was aspired by Europeans' settlement and their exploitation of Natives. Many historians agree that slavery and indentured servitude coexisted in the early part of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. They established laws to limit the rights of Africans and African-Americans and solidified the institution of slavery based on race and heredity. In New England, colonists continued the practice of enslaving indigenous Indians, particularly those captured during warfare, while also legally justifying the enslavement of African and African Americans. Ahab's attitude towards his crewmates resonated such a slavery atmosphere in the novel.

Ishmael's direct address (earlier detailed) to the reader establishes a formative form of slavery. With the help of Ishmael's speech, Melville has established a slave culture which is apparent through the allusions to personages such as the white whale, Ismael and their relations with others characters in the novel. One of the allusions is the chase of whales. The chasing of whales through the vast oceans analogies to the chase of runaway slaves after their escape from their masters. Melville by putting such a description has developed a parallel relation between text and its meaning in American history. The chase of whales can be parodied by the degrading hunted group; the whales or the slaves. Although the whales in the novel were non-human, the sailors treated them as an object rather than life forms. In American history, both whales and slaves were not only hunted mercilessly but were also treated as an object of profit. Just as, whaling in America was an incredibly profitable enterprise which sustained the survival of Americans. Similarly, the hunting of slaves which was less dangerous and commercial. When slaves ran away, wealthy landowners gave extremely large

amounts of money for returning of the captured. Landowners desperately needed their slaves, just as America needed sperm oil, and both enterprises would reward money to whoever could supply them with their means to their desired end.

One of the factors which Melville in *Moby Dick* used to demonstrate slavery was the scars' description of slaves which substituted the scars on the whales. When slaves ran away, the wanted advertisements were often given for the description that included various scars and marks on their bodies as means of identification. Fred Bernard comments that "[i]mportant to the capture of runaways were their various marks, some natural, others inflicted". (2012:396) Slaves were scared of many things, including various beatings by their masters. We would find that in one of the runaway advertisement of descriptions, the slaves had the upper lid of their right eye torn, and a scar on their forehead. Melville has described the whale in the same framework. In the novel, many of the animals escaped after having been marked by whalers, but not entirely captured as Melville has cited "Not a few are captured having the deep scars of these encounters,—furrowed heads, broken teeth, scalloped fins; and in some instances, wrenched and dislocated mouths". (2013: 349) The scars that the whale gave to the other animals could be used to identify them as different from the whale. Melville scribes Captain Ahab in such a frame which he repeatedly remembers every scar on the white whale. These scars were either white or black.

Race politics was the biggest factor which stereotyped slavery in America. In "The Questions of the Race in *Moby Dick*" Fred V Bernald has pointed out that *Moby Dick* is awash with racial and ethnic interpretations. He provides the example of *Pequod* which floats a Babel of racial variations. The race as lower and upper was decided on the base of the colour of the skin. Basically white and black colours formulated the Americans' identity as either masters or slaves. The colour of the slaves was black. This significant system seems to be used by Melville in order to represent the status of slavery in American history. Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* is an intricate signifying system of colours that function to invert the traditional symbols of black and white. Melville has utilized white to suggest its elusive nature, which is presented physically by the white whale's flight, psychologically by Ahab's depreciating sanity in chasing the white whale and ultimately functions to suggest a diminishing sense of spirituality within the borders of humanity. The meaning of one colour's symbol must be unravelled in order to understand another, even more, complex symbol, whether the symbol which concerns racism, religion, or society in general. Melville notes early in his text that "Ignorance is the parent of fear," (24) yet by creating his system of symbolism. Melville has used white to be led astray in fear of the presence of ignorance. The understanding of such matters simply lies in the complex nature of the intricacy of whiteness.

In a subsequent way, Melville creates an atmosphere of a comparative ethnic- race in the novel. His attempt to diversify the white and black is basically based on skin colours in his refashioning of the characters. In the novel, the whalers' attempt to hunt an infamous white whale induces fear and nobility. In American settlements, the colour has excavated a large difference between White and Black. Traditionally white-skinned Americans were stereotyped as superior and black skin Americans circled in the inferior reign. Ishmael explicitly points out, "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me". (2013:193) Ismael associates the atrocities with whiteness and finds something lurking "in the innermost idea of this hue (whiteness), which strikes more panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood". (252)

We can see that Ishmael recognizes that white is symbolic. In many cases, Ishmael views it as beautiful and virtuous in "marbles, japonicas, and pearls". (2013:193) It might not be obvious, but he has said that it's a colour that is used to represent royalty, brides, wisdom, and the heavens. However, we should take note that although there are many positive visuals that the colour white brings to mind, Ishmael can also consider it pretty sinister. Apart from the allusion to the white, there are also strong parallels with whaling and slavery in direct regard to the black colour. Other than *Moby-Dick* himself, most whales are entirely black. The narrator of *Moby-Dick* comments, "blackness was the rule amongst almost all whales" (2013: 139). And Captain Ahab is considered, by most interpreters, to be white, as were most whaling captains of the time. This vision of whites (whaling captains) chasing blacks (whales) immediately conjures up illusions of slavery.

With such an obvious parallel, Melville's brashness with his views of slavery, during a time period in which the institution was highly debated, is quite surprising. In contrast to whiteness' connections to nobility, Ishmael points out that the deadly polar bears and great white sharks are both dangerous creatures that hide behind a veil of whiteness. He narrates, "That ghastly whiteness it is which imparts such an abhorrent mildness, even more, loathsome than terrific, to the dumb gloating of their aspect". (139) Melville hints that the whiteness of these creatures is a form of trickery that prevents potential prey from realizing what they are up against. The great white shark's silent stillness of death' accompanied by its colour induces fear. Charles Feidelson, while analyzing *Moby Dick* characterizes the narrative as a symbolic voyage and uses a traditional interpretive approach. Feidelson contents that Melville describes this voyage as a vision and, consequently, the lure of the sea becomes a parallel of the mind's "quest for knowledge". (2012: 671) Several scholars have examined the meaning of colours within the text, while other scholars have explored race, society, and other textual and cultural symbols. For example, Feidelson asserts, "unlike Hawthorne, the Melville of *Moby-Dick* does not verge towards allegory, because he locates his symbols in a unitary act of perception". (674) Melville not only charges the narrative events with symbolic meaning, but he also draws from several maritime disasters to add to his signifying system. Melville acknowledges these disasters, the dangers of voyages, and the desperation and fortitude necessary to maintain life in the lives of slaves in early American settlements. Here, many questions remain unanswered about whether the white and the black colours resonate with the moral and spiritual presumptions between the slaves and the masters.

Saussure has provided a useful linguistic framework to examine the system of colours in *Moby Dick*. In his essay "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign," Saussure explains that language is a complex network of various meanings for each given word. Saussure cited that "[s]ome people regard language when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only — a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names". (832) However, Saussure notes that "[t]he linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses". (832) By acknowledging the ambiguity of a word's meaning, Saussure's theory can be used to propose various interpretations which operate behind the symbols of certain colours in *Moby-Dick*. The fascination with the symbolism of the colours black and white Melville's notion of slavery can be further understood and explained through the character of Queequeg. Ishmael has described Queequeg as a "dark complexioned' harpooner" and "[f]or all his tattooing he was, on the whole, a clean, comely looking cannibal".(2013:16,26) Once again, Saussure's theoretical framework in which signs operate within signifying systems provides an interruptive perspective that is strongly suggested by Melville's characterization of Queequeg. Here, the importance of Queequeg's skin functions as its own signifying system which contradicts whether the white man or the black man. The tattoos that cover the surface of Queequeg's skin become a unique signifying system within the text's complex system of colour. Melville ascribes:

Poor Queequeg! When the ship was about half disembowelled, you should have stooped over the hatchway, and peered down upon him here; where stripped to his woollen drawers, the tattooed savage was crawling about amid that dampness and slime, like a green spotted lizard at the bottom of a well. (2013:520)

Queequeg's image recalls the image of slaves who laboured and worked for their masters. Through this, we can trace that both the whales portrayed in *Moby-Dick* and the slaves of America fought vehemently against whaling and slavery, respectively, although the fight was unfair and seemingly futile. The whales that the *Pequod* would harpoon would drag the boats across the ocean for hours before giving up to capture. In the chapter "Stubb Kills a Whale," Melville comments that "whole Atlantics and Pacifics seemed passed as they shot on their way, till at length the whale somewhat slackened his flight". (2013:256) The flight of whale resounds the memory of the vast amount of slaves that did run away from their master's against their "resistance to servitude." Graham Russel Hodges' has commented on the implications of the wanted poster advertising runaway slaves: "First and foremost, runaway notices are evidence of slave resistance". (13-14) Robert C Ellickson has stated that just as the fast fish and lose fish rules were in America similarly there were hard rules for the slaves also. If someone caught a whale which already belonged to another sailor, the former could not

claim it as his own. Similarly, it entails how blacks were plucked from Africa and used as slaves when they had not been purchased yet. If slaves had been purchased, they could not be claimed by other masters who purchased after. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it mandatory that the states to which escaped slaves fled were obligated to return them to their masters upon their discovery and subjected persons who helped runaway slaves to criminal sanctions. Such cases were found in courts where slaves were given back to their masters after running away. Although whaling cases were usually settled out of court, the ideas were the same. In the history of slavery in America, an escaped slave Thomas Sims was brought to court and awarded back to his master. It is interesting to mention that the judge that handed down the decision just so happened to be Melville's father-in-law. (Pisano 12–13) Such instances strengthen the scenario that Melville had witnessed slavery which can be metaphorically used to establish *Moby Dick's* involvement in the representation of slavery.

The ferocious capture and brutal killings of whales portrayed in *Moby-Dick* parallel the captures and killings of slaves during the 19th century before emancipation. American history has been the witness of the transportation of slaves from Europe to America before the American War of Independence.

Apart from America, slaves were brought to the Caribbean Sea and only 5% of all were imported to North America. The rest of them either died or were killed mysteriously due to a lack of supportive food and a long population of slaves. A key reason for the high death toll was the tidal wave of war and desolation that the slave trade unleashed into the heart of Africa. Huge numbers of people died being marched to the coasts of Africa from the interior as well as in an endless series of wars produced by the quest for new slaves. Millions more would die in concentration camps at both ends of the sea journey, and significant numbers would die due to the appalling conditions on the slave ships. I think that Melville has beautifully represented the complex and terrible consequences of enslavement and power. He has possessed the characters and colours in a contradictory framework which has been the issue of discussion among scholars today.

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