

DEMONSTRATION OF MASTER-SLAVE RELATIONS IN ANDRE BRINK'S THE RIGHTS OF DESIRE

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Abstract

Bound by discord and common intention, both masters and slaves were linked by potent, impossibly contradictory feelings of love and hate. The master-slave relations could be regulated, at one and the same time, by exploitation and affiliation, submission under the master's influence and affinity. It is identified by a shared reliance: the master relied on slave's allegiance and the slave relied on the master's care and feeding and benevolent treatment to him. The present paper emphasizes on the master-slave relations regarding sexual relations, exploitation of slaves as well as the master's care and benevolent treatment to his slaves as reflected in Andre Brink's The Rights of Desires. It also throws light on the changing relations between masters and their slaves with the changing time. Sexual relations between master and slave as well as exploitation of slaves are portrayed through the story of Antje of Bengal. The master's care and benevolent treatment to his servant as well as servant's care for his master are reflected through the relations between Magrieta and Ruben.

Key words: *master-slave relations, discord, sexual relations, exploitation, benevolent treatment, Andre Brink, The Rights of Desire etc.*

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Bound by discord and common intention, both masters and slaves were linked by potent, impossibly contradictory feelings of love and hate. Blacks in enslavement and whites who enslaved them inferred economic and political status, social identity, and cultural and moral imperatives from the fight they waged against each other. The relations between masters and their slaves contrive a significant amount of alteration in some aspects. It was just by good fortune that whether the relations persevered between slave and his master could be regarded merely as a way of financial stability or familial relationship. The life of slaves who are used as a means of financial stability, just pivoted around money. On the other hand, slaves who are used as familial companions are regarded as a buddy or truly as a family member. No matter whether the relationship was rested on economics or emotions, the relationship would always be chosen by the master. In this connection, Scarborough notes that the master-slave relationship consisted of the 'Principal task of the elite slaveholders to keep their servants relatively contented with their inferior status while at the same time extracting the maximum amount of labor from them.' (176)

The master-slave relations could be regulated, at one and the same time, by exploitation and affiliation, submission under the master's influence and affinity. It is identified by a collective reliance: the master relied on slave's allegiance and the slave relied on the master's care and feeding and benevolent treatment to him. On one hand, slaves had to submit themselves to their master's will under the ceaseless peril; on the other hand they could become all-important to them, serve as their trusted friends, and be sharer in their confidential information. One may imagine that masters who possessed one or a few slaves had an intimate relationship to them than who possessed many. But, even in large households some slaves were closer to their masters than the others, depending on their respective functions.

The present paper emphasizes on the master-slave relations regarding sexual relations, exploitation of slaves as well as the master's care and feeding and benevolent treatment to his slaves as reflected in Andre Brink's *The Rights of Desires*. It also throws light on the changing relations between masters and their slaves with the changing time. The novel deals with the four separate stories which intermingle and run parallel throughout the novel. The stories include life tells of Ruben, Magrieta, Tessa and Antje of Bengal. Ruben is an aged male protagonist of the novel. Magrieta is his aged housekeeper who has served him and his family since last forty years. Tessa is Ruben's new and younger lodger. Antje of Bengal is a 17th century slave girl whose ghost wanders in the old house of Ruben. Sexual relations between master and slave as well as exploitation of slaves are portrayed through the story of Antje. The master's care and feeding and benevolent treatment to his servant as well as servant's care for his master is reflected through the relations between Magrieta and Ruben.

Master-slave relations in 17th century are depicted through the relations between Antje of Bengal and her master, Willem Mostert. Antje has been brought to the Cape with her mother Katrijn, on a Dutch slave ship from Batavia in 1696. At that time she is just seven years old. Her story is full of incidents which throw light on the two major aspects of master-slave relations: intimacy and exploitation. When Antje is seven years old, she is sold to a baker, Anthonij Stalpaert, for the first time. Later after eleven years, when she is nearly about eighteen, her master dies and she is sold off to Willem Mostert. He is a tavern keeper at Papenboom. He is one of the ancient owners of Ruben's house. He is attracted towards Antje because of her incredible beauty. It may be considered that he has murdered Anthonij as he wanted Antje's possession. He has the habit of consorting sexually with most of his wife's female slaves. For the sake of his relation with Antje and due to his lust, Willem kills his wife, Susara, with the help of magical elements. Brink describes the relation between Mostert and Antje as a blend of power and pleasure by citing a quote by Nigel Penn. The narrator states:

Certainly the 'spirals of power and pleasure' cited by Nigel Penn in a different but comparable account ('The Fatal Passion of Brewer Menssink' in *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways*, David Philip, Cape Town) were much in evidence in the relationship between Willem Mostert and Antje of Bengal (ROD 42).

After Antje's arrival in their house, Willem initiates crawling outside at night to see and speak to Antje in the vicinity. He used to make sex with her in the shadow of

night. The narrator informs that he doesn't cognize the true emotional state of Antje towards Willem. He doesn't know that whether she just surrenders to her master's wish or whether the sexual desire is consensual. But, it is very obvious that Willem considers these affairs as 'his rights.' (41) It demonstrates that how slave-women were forced to comply with sexual advances by their masters on a very regular basis. If these women even try to resist, they were severely punished. Thus, a very large number of slaves became doxy for their male masters.

The husband-wife relations are certainly affected due to master-slave sexual relations. With the passing time the relationship between Willem and Susara becomes worse due to Willem's habit of having sex with Susara's female slaves. Many a times, she catches him with her slave women, but he manages to convince her by giving reasonable answers. But one night Susara catches Willem and Antje in bed. She becomes so furious that she starts throbbing them with a chair. Willem manages to jump through a window and leaves Antje there only to experience Susara's massive anger. The very harsh throbbing causes a miscarriage. Brink describes it as 'the first indication anyone had that the slave girl had been pregnant with her master's child.' (44) Susara executed her anger on the poor slave girl. Here, the mistress, Susara, is able to take out her aggression on Antje, rather than guilty Willem. Brink emphasizes the frustration and betrayal felt by white mistresses. He exposes the outlet of their rage towards the slave women/girls. As women in South Africa were quite powerless in 17th century, and the option of divorce was not easily available for them, they punish slave women for the wrong doings of their husbands.

Susara tries to take divorce from her husband but when the divorce petition goes in the court, somehow Willem manages to convince her. And surprisingly she takes her petition back. It's quite shocking to the reader but Iman Cooper's observation makes it clear that why she behaves in such a strange manner. Cooper notes that, '... white planters' wives were socially rendered to remain publically silent in the face of their husband's betrayal and abuse; hence they often executed their anger on the black slave...' (21) Most often these masters were already bound in matrimony, as in the present novel, Willem is married to a rich widow, Susara and comes to stay at her home. Obviously the sexual relations between husband and slave women cause tension and hatred between the slave and the mistress.

Willem cold bloodedly murders Susara due to his lust for Antje. But, Willem's concupiscence 'had perished with the last breath of his wife.' (47) At this moment he doesn't want Antje. On the contrary, Antje desires to meet him. But, he rejects her and

becomes an aged man overnight. When the murder case is reported to the council of Justice, Willem is never accused nor even ordered to appear in the court as a witness. Instead Antje is summoned as accused in this case. And she never complains against her master. She accepts the charge of murder, even though she has not played any active role in the murder. She is condemned, executed and sentenced to death. The narrator gives an explanation to this by quoting Penn. He states:

We may ... assume that one of the state's ambitions was to maintain the social and judicial distance which existed between masters and slaves at the Cape. To place a member of the Cape's elite in the same case as criminal slaves, and to judge this member as a co-conspirator of these slaves, was obviously more than the Court of Justice could stomach. To declare them as equals before the law would be to undermine the structure of inequality which bound the Cape's colonial society together (48, 49).

Two days later the act of killing Antje as a punishment for a crime, Willem somehow contrives to get and bring back the fragmented parts of her body to his home in Pepenboom. And then he makes suicide by hanging on an Oak tree near his house. Later, nobody could find Antje's body anywhere. In this connection Cooper points that, 'As a result of commodification, black bodies were rendered disciplined subjects; beholden to the will of white men.' (21)

Master-servant relations in 20th century are depicted through the depiction of relations between Ruben and Magrieta. Magrieta is Ruben's black housekeeper. Though she is a maid, she is not a slave because slavery is abolished in South Africa since December 1, 1834. She serves Ruben and his family for nearly forty years. She had helped him and his wife, Riana through both good and bad times. She keeps his house running like a ship through sometimes turbulent seas. Ruben thinks that,

It must have been harder on her than she'd ever let on, dealing not only with our lives but with the rough patches of her own: the deaths of husbands and children, the forced removal from District Six in sixties, political upheavals and family squabbles. Her main concern, as far as we could tell, had always been our wellbeing, not her own (64).

Ruben, though Magrieta's master, gives respect to her. We come across one such incident when Ruben introduces Magrieta properly to Tessa and vice versa. While introducing Magrieta, he calls her as 'a friend and a mother to me for almost a lifetime.' (72) Here, Brink points that due to psychological habit, master considers himself as not only dominant but also dependent of and affection towards his servant.

At the same time, Ruben and Riana help Magrieta in her bad times. There is one incident, when Magrieta lives with her second husband, Barney, in District Six. The Government has decided to clean-up the District Six. The bulldozers run over their houses. At that time Ruben and Riana sit with Magrieta and Barney in their small sitting room to oppose this action of Government. But the police come and turn them out with tear gas and dogs. In the end they have to run for their lives and the bulldozers flattened the house with everything in it. One of the policemen has yelled at Riana and Ruben by calling them 'Bloody white Kaffirs' (87)! Due to this upheaval, Magrieta loses the child she was carrying and Barney is fired from his job. Then Ruben and Riana take lead to support them. They approach their friends and colleagues and acquaintances for help in providing odd jobs to Magrieta and Barney. After many efforts, they managed to secure a small home for her at Mandalay. Magrieta takes possession of her home and at the very same time Ruben suffered from angina attack. Magrieta immediately offers to move back to look after him but he refuses. He tells her that he will feel like a useless invalid. But he admits that 'the real reason was that I simply couldn't do it to her.' (90) Ruben cares for Magrieta's children too. Sometimes Riana complains him that he has 'more time for Magrieta's child than your own.' (89) Brink depicts very unordinary caring relations between master and servant in the contemporary racially divided society of South Africa.

In another incident, Magrieta is so depressed due to a murder incident which happened in front of her home. The next day she comes to Ruben as usual for her work. She narrates the whole incident to him. He doesn't understand what to do in such situation. He tries to feel her comfortable. He prepares coffee for her. Here, master is seen as a fatherly person who makes coffee for his servant considering her as his own daughter. Under normal circumstances, Magrieta would never allow her master to make coffee for her but this time she has no objection, even she is not aware of it. Ruben is disturbed by the awareness of the distance that separated them. There is only a kitchen table between them but it seems that they might be creatures from different worlds, who just happened by the purest coincidence to be sharing the same space. The narrator describes her state of mind in apt words. He states, 'She, the large mother

from the townships ... harbouring somewhere inside her global body the violence and the rage,... a girl not yet returned from her night abroad.' (142) Ruben thinks it difficult to cover the distance between them. He thinks: 'How could I ever reach out from my world to touch hers? No way, no way at all.' (142) Even though Magrieta shares his life for almost forty years, he knows very little about her world. 'She was as unreal to me as any ghost.' (142) He suggests her that he would take her home in his car to fetch her things and then she can stay in his home. But she refuses to take him to her home because she thinks that it would be dangerous for him to go in the black settlement. Hence, she preferred to go by taxi. It makes clear that in dangerous situation also black servants like Magrieta do care for their masters. In the last part of the novel, when Tessa continuously brings strangers to their home, Magrieta feels uncomfortable in doing her job. She refuses to work for the unknown people. She refuses to wash Tessa's friend's underclothes. She warns Ruben that either she or Tessa should leave the house. Magrieta tells him that 'I got my self respect... I'm not taking orders from a stranger... I'm not his maid.' (278) And then she decides to take retirement. But as Ruben is in love with Tessa, he cannot turn her out. At the same time he cannot ask Magrieta to turn out. Finally she leaves Ruben. He takes her to the station in his car. He holds her in his arms. He feels as if he is taking leave of his own mother. They become sentimental. It's very touchy to read that they 'were both crying.' (287) Brink suggests that Magrieta's service comes from her heart rather than body.

Thus, in the present novel master-slave relations are depicted in several colors of emotions varying from love, benevolence, care to hatred and rage. These vary from person to person. Though there is a reflection of hatred and rage in the relations between mistress and slave women, this is only because of the feeling of insecurity. Love, affection and benevolence play a central role in the development of master-slave relations throughout the novel.

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