

## Laughter of the Wretched: Morrison's Beloved

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### Abstract

Toni Morrison is the most popular African American female writer who attempts to describe, criticize and reflect the circumstances of black females' suffering from oppression. Because of their skin color that signified submission and inferiority, African American women had to struggle double if not triple oppression because of being black, because of being female and also because of being poor, weak, lonely and hopeless. Suffering for the black female has frequently been a lifestyle and tears their only way to respond. However, when the black woman laughs, it has mostly nothing to do with what is funny at all, it is but a way to keep from crying. African Americans' laughing aims at breaking whites' stereotypical hegemonic and oppressive consciousness and their pride of the illusive superiority. It is a cry of pain that Morrison calls the cry of laugh that characters reflect in her famous novel '*Beloved*' which unveils the suffering of colored people. In their laughing, blacks attempt to decolonize whites' consciousness and replace it with the blacks' consciousness of freedom, resistance and self-esteem. The paper examines how laughter is used by African Americans as one of the defense mechanisms to deconstruct white racist thinking and oppressive ideology.

**Keywords:** Laughter ; African Americans ; Oppression ; Toni Morrison ; Beloved.

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## **I- Introduction:**

Laughter is one of the most appealing topics in literature and in life and it is generally linked to joy, mirth, happiness and humor. However, it does not always signify risibility and glee; it may hide inner feelings such as embarrassment, frustration or even confusion. It may also be used sometimes to defend, to resist or to oppose; this happens at the case of the intentionally weakened individual who finds no other weapon except to laugh as it is stated by Mark Twain: *"The human race has only one really effective weapon and that is laughter. Against the assault of laughter - ha-ha-ha-ha! -nothing can stand"* (Twain, 1916: 142).

Besides, analyzing the subject of laughter in relation to identity construction and oppression is prodigious and it is infrequently taken into consideration. Laughter is also a defense weapon that people use as far as there is danger where protection is required. Additionally, when laughter is mentioned within a racial context and the midst of suffering experiences, it should have a different connotation from the one it has in a humorous milieu as it moves from the linguistic to the extra linguistic response and communication. In the African American context, it is extremely correct that laughter is a key to live, a mood to respond and a mask to wear, this also confirms the conception of Peter Goldman in his *'The Death and Life of Malcolm X'*:

Anything that's paradoxical has to have some humor in it or it'll crack you up. You know that? You put hot water in a cold glass, it'll crack. Because it's a contrast, a paradox. And America is such a

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paradoxical society, hypocritically paradoxical, that if you don't have some humor, you'll crack up.... You have to laugh at it.  
(Goldman, 1973:24)

The African American Toni Morrison displays very eloquent pictures and significant combinations where laughing characters are found with crying characters. Within the same place in the forest, some characters laugh when others cry; some of them dance when others weep for a while then laugh, all that happens in the religious 'Clearings' of the black community. Laughing is then not only a sort of humor and happy feelings, it is also a way of sharing suffering and painful experiences for the sake of providing each other with the power to resist and defend the black identity, laughter gives the blacks an outstanding opportunity to share tragedy and sorrows rather than comedy and welfare.

## **II-What is Laughter**

Laughter is one of the various sounds human beings make in their discussions and reactions. It is a behavior that implies a response to a stimulating word, gesture or even somebody's laughter. The American psychologist Robert Provine defines Laughter as: "*An instinctive, contagious, stereotyped, unconsciously controlled, social play vocalization*" (Provine, 2001:426). The writer emphasizes the natural characteristic of the sound, its spontaneity and contagion. Some nonhuman beings produce the same sound of laughter in their communication with each other and the scientific research confirms that some animals' are able to produce the same sound and call it laughter too.

In spite of that, Aristotle affirms many years ago that laughter is man's highest privilege that is inaccessible to other creatures. Besides, there is a difference between the

emotional and the voluntary types of laughter which explains that the first one is natural and spontaneous whereas the second is forced and emphasized by certain aspects and here is the huge gap. They mostly differ in production and perception because the listener also plays a crucial role in classifying the laughter within one category.

Beside the highlighted notion that laughter is the best medicine and that it is linked to humor and comedy, people know nothing about laughter itself, the way it occurs, the standards that govern it and the mechanisms which facilitate the production of the sound. Gelotology is the study of laughter and its psychological and physiological effects on the body and brain beside its importance in the clinical contexts and health therapy. Laughter is a universal code that everybody understands without translation and it is effectively important for people having psychological disorder and depression syndromes. Provine states:

Laughter is a mechanism everyone has; laughter is part of universal human vocabulary. There are thousands of languages, hundreds of thousands of dialects, but everyone speaks laughter in pretty much the same way." Babies have the ability to laugh before they ever speak. Children who are born blind and deaf still retain the ability to laugh. (Provine, 2005: 395)

Provine produces many articles and researches about laughter and he analyses it from multiple perspectives; he proves throughout his research that laughter is unspeakable and any attempt to produce it by force leads to anything else but not laughter. He also presumes that laughter is a

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contagious sound but that aspect is open to be reduced by repetition and not all sounds of laughter have the same effect on the listener. That articulation has a relation with the theory of stimulus/ response and the required elements of the stimulus to reach the desired response but it may also show negative effects of the stimulus being repeated for many times. Ella Wilcox advises everybody to laugh because when you laugh, the world laughs with you; this is questionable in the light of laughter contagion characteristic.

Many scholars considered laughter, comedy and humor as interchangeable concepts that drive to similar ends but others reject that viewpoint claiming that the three concepts are not necessarily alike. The sociologist Anton C. Zijderveld writes many books and articles about laughing and perceives the issue differently from psychologists and philosophers. His viewpoint is based on the wide disparity between laughter and humor: *"There is humor without laughter and laughter without humor."* (Zijderveld,1983: 26)

Besides, the French philosopher Henry Bergson insists on the principle of breaking the usual and defying the common sense when he strives to rationalize certain subjective themes such as laughter in a distinctive way. Firstly, he illustrates that a funny hat, a bag or a shoe is not funny and what makes it funny is the relation and depiction people draw to human being. Second, he presses the notion that laughter expresses no emotion and that no one laughs alone. By claiming so, he denies the relation between the sound and the feeling on the one hand; and turns to the more sociological dimension that necessitates two people for the laughter to be called a laughter on the other hand.

In his 1911 article about laughter, his overwhelming ideas challenged the ordinary stream of thinking and drew

scholars' attention to review the subject differently. His 'human attributed quality' summarized in that statement: *"You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it, the human caprice whose mould it has assumed."* (Bergson, 1911: 4) signifies the human touch that typifies the object and how much similar peculiarly to what is human.

Moreover, Bergson is one of the first researchers who insist on the sociological context for laughter to be understood and perceived: *"Our laughter is always the laughter of a group."* (Bergson, 1911: 5) It is in no way, according to Bergson, linked to the nature of the laughter as a contagious behavior, the writer adds: *"To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one."* (Bergson, 1911: 5) He goes beyond it to show that laughter must have a SOCIAL signification emphasizing the conception of the notion. If Bergson's statement is accepted, how is the individual's laughter explained or interpreted while alone and what is its name then? It happens most of the time that the person laughs when he/she remembers a story, recalls a comic event or a funny joke; isn't that called a laughter? Is it a laughter out of context, beyond time and place? The answer is found in Robert Provine's article 'Laughter': *"Laughter is a decidedly social signal, not an egocentric expression of emotion . . . people are about 30 times more likely to laugh when they are in a social situation than when they are alone."* (Provine, 1996: 41)

In addition to that, the tragic laughter comes from a deeper source that nobody is able to decipher or decode except the concerned person as he/she is the most conscious one about that secret source. He explains that laughing

breaks the seriousness that should exist to classify owners from serfs and people from God and to give high rank possessors and oppressors the sacredness and immunity against all attempts of violation.

In an interview with Toni Morrison, she declares: *"Other people call it humor. It's not really that. It's not sort of laughing away one's troubles...Laughter itself for Black people has nothing to do with what's funny at all."* (1994). She receives harsh critical views about that type of declarations though she has frequently been striving to scratch up the subversion and to deconstruct the stereotypical picture that white people endeavored to draw for many centuries. Again, she adds in her novel 'Jazz': *"Laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears."* (Morrison, 2004: 113). She attempts to scrutinize the circumstances lurking behind laughter that makes it more complicated than tears. The statement is strikingly paradoxical as it compiles two contradictory ends and draws a pellucid picture in few words.

### **III-Beyond Laughter:**

Laughter is not only a natural sound that may come out of a happy face and a comic scene, it is affected by various factors as people sometimes laugh to hide tears, pain or sadness. They may laugh to motivate others to laugh and share happy feelings though they are burning inside. In his famous literary work *"Endgame"*, Samuel Beckett states at the tongue of the character Nell that nothing is funnier than unhappiness, it is the most comical thing in the world. (1986: 101). That statement is similar to Mark Twain's: *"The secret source of Humor is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven."* (1897: 101). The most influential claim is found in Marx Groucho's letters addressed to himself when he insists many times that the only real laughter comes from despair and that people's laughs are not a signal of joy and mirth but of pain and grief (1967: 247). The quote implements a metaphorical image which

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assimilates the picture of a beautiful rose that emerges within a large dark forest; it is a subversive laughter that comes from the deepest darkened spot of the human soul. Is laughter a product of nature, society or culture? Does laughter consider cultural boundaries, racial variations and gender differences? How is laughter framed by place and time variables? Laughter that crosses cultural differences, exceeds time and ignores place is the one that is hardly affected by any of the variables. In fact, laughing is universal in the way that it remains a sound after all, what makes the difference is what exactly carries people to laugh and the way people perceive one's laughter. Do Africans laugh for the same reason that makes Europeans, Americans or Asian laugh? Does an American joke make Asians laugh too?

The paper is concerned more with laughter that is totally free of any differences and barriers, laughter that goes beyond the sound itself, the linguistic context and the laughing scene including two practitioners. Philosophy is the best doctrine that may give such an explanation of what is beyond laughter as it tends to link it also with religion, and Nietzsche's conviction would be highly adequate and connotative:

Perhaps I know best why man is the only animal that laughs: he alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was *compelled* to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as might have been expected, the most cheerful. (1968: 91)

Nietzsche is affirming that the more unhappy the human being is, the more cheerful he might feel and the source of laughter is by no means humor or comedy, it mainly stems from tragedy, suffering and unhappiness. The philosopher changes his view later about laughter when he introduced the concept of laughter of heights and criticizes his former convictions that were affected

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by romanticist views concerning tragedy and metaphysical comfort.

However, he still confirms that the source of humor and laughter is tragic, laughter becomes associated with moments of escaping from reality as reality is most of the time uncomfortable for the entire being. What changes between the two sequences is the religious explanation and the relation made between the metaphysical comfort and reality. Besides, Nietzsche's contradictory views about willed laughter and laughter of heights that are stated at the tongue of Zarathustra, in '*Thus Spake Zarathustra*', are defiant and audaciously out of time because it is a slap at the face of despair and tragedy. It is another way to reject the limitation of what is possible and reachable for humans.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's attitude is close to Nietzsche's and the common point is they both agree that the source of laughter is sorrow rather than joy. According to him: "*Instead of sorrow, you choose a joy that is sorrow's changeling. This joy you have now chosen, the laughter of despair.*" (1987: 204). Kierkegaard's "*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*" clarifies that humor and laughter are merely existential attitudes rather than an attempt to escape reality and daily life difficulties. Besides, in his manuscript "*Either/Or*", he explains that despair is the inevitable result of boredom that arises from the individual's overridden sticking to plans and principles ignoring the importance of pleasure and humor in life. However, living aesthetically that means enjoying life to its extremes and putting some laughs and humor to it turns it to an aimless and meaningless being as the individual is determined by no life rules nor ethical principles. The philosopher then turns to explain that life commitments and responsibilities play a crucial role in the limitation of despair resulting from an overdose of enjoyment and aestheticism. At last, Kierkegaard concludes from the *Either* who is the aesthete and the *Or* who is the ethical that one has to find congruities and contradictions between one's actions and ideals as explained by Evans Stephen:

What Kierkegaard admires about  
this is that whereas everyone is

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able to see 'contradictions' or incongruities and laugh at them, by no means everyone 'is able to see and face the fundamental contradiction in her own existence-to smile and laugh at herself. (1987: 181)

The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin himself devotes a large part of his book *'Rabelais and His World'* to explain the philosophical and metaphysics of laughter insisting successively that laughter is to be understood as a devilish masked signal sent to human beings to persuade and orient them to devilish acts :

Laughter was sent to earth by the devil, but it appeared to men under the mask of joy, and so they readily accepted it. Then laughter cast away its mask and looked at man and at the world with the eyes of angry satire. (1984: 38)

He continues then interpreting the bitter taste attached to laughter, the one that bears sarcastic spalls to throw at one's face, as a satanic subversive deed: *"Laughter combined with bitterness which takes the grotesque form acquires the traits of mockery and cynicism, and finally becomes satanic."* (Id: 51). That type of sarcastic laughter is detached and different from the joyful laughter that entails body organs in the process.

Furthermore, the surrealist French writer André Breton coined the term 'Black humor' that turns later to be similar to dark comedy or dark humor referring to certain topics that are highly serious but discussed in a humorous manner like death, diseases, violence, need, discrimination, etc. It was meant as a subgenre of comedy that has no relation with the black human race. It simply allows surpass the seriousness of some subjects and breaks the dark boundaries of having them into discussions. Besides, The Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud is known for his psychoanalytical study of laughter and his attempts to explain the relation between the ego and the black laughter, he states in his article *"Humor"*:

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The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.  
(1927: 162)

It is a subgenre of comedy like the 'Blue Comedy' and the 'Yellow Laughter', each one classifies a determined category. Freud's dark humor focuses mainly on the ego's definite persistence against trauma and suffering and the latter is not more than flexible occasions for having some pleasure and indirect paths to joy and mirth. Laughter rejects all claims of reality and adopts the unreality of suffering then the unreality of the whole world consequently. Laughter revolts, resists, struggles, and persists and what makes it exceptional is what assimilates and attaches it paradoxically to tragedy.

Additionally, laughter for African Americans is also exceptional; it is tragic, painful and desperate. It is hopeless, lost and precipitous; it is the consequence of the ethnic discrimination and dehumanization of the black race by the white Americans. The world is cruel and it does rarely show its complete willingness to support the weak, the poor and the vulnerable. It proves to be most of the time aiding the most powerful, the rich and the dauntless. Jews and African Americans have been struggling for centuries to claim the identity of the minority within the two systems of the holocaust and slavery. What is common between the two categories is the tragic sense that drives laughter instead of tears, smiles and humor instead of pain and fatigue. Inside the large world of darkness, these people decide to strengthen their already fascinating spiritual power to destroy the enemy. They have been in a situation that imposes laughter as the only alternative with no other option to revolt and sneer from the other who is the dominant. Laughter is as a defense mechanism that is hardly expected to change the situation but it serves best as an effective instrument to internalize the victim's abnormality and absorbs his anger. It is a

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response to pain, despair and tragedy, it is a resistance engine and a weapon to deconstruct the past and construct the victorious present.

In an interview with Toni Morrison, she declares: "*Other people call it humor. It's not really that. It's not sort of laughing away one's troubles...Laughter itself for Black people has nothing to do with what's funny at all.*" (1994). She receives harsh critical views about that type of declarations though she has frequently been striving to scratch up the subversion and to deconstruct the stereotypical picture that white people endeavored to draw for many centuries. Again, she adds in her novel 'Jazz': "*Laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears.*" (2004: 113). She attempts to scrutinize the circumstances lurking behind laughter that makes it more complicated than tears. The statement is strikingly paradoxical as it compiles two contradictory ends and draws a pellucid picture in few words. The emotional flow persists to be unconscious at the time of excitement whether the black individual laughs or weeps, it is where one stands unwillingly on a fire rope and has to stick to it despite the pain and injuries. Toni Morrison is one of the very few authors who could transmit a true portrait of slavery, segregation and prejudice black people have been going through before edging on a safer beach of superficial liberty.

#### **IV-Laughter and the Oppression Dichotomy:**

Studying the history of laughter is highly interesting because it shows the different perspectives that early researchers follow to analyze the issue of laughter. Laughter used to be a privilege restricted only to the aristocratic people whose superiority might be broken or threatened if inferior people share it with them. The idea is illustrated best by Alexander I. Herzen in his book entitled '*On Art*':

The serfs are deprived of the right to smile in the presence of the landowners. If inferiors are permitted to laugh in front of their

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superiors. (1954:  
223)

The Russian author Herzen's reflects the attitude of societies from the fourth Century when people stopped laughing because of the increasing dominating fanaticism; employees and slaves used to be severely punished when they laughed with their employers. Superior people refused to share humor with their slaves, according to him, because it drove to the absence of respect and to giving slaves unnecessary doses of audacity and value. This is mainly what leads some other intellectuals to concentrate on the tragic laughter that comes from despair, the silenced laughter that emanates from the hearts of the oppressed in the name of the Theory of Superiority. The tragic laughter comes from a deeper source that nobody is able to decipher or decode except the concerned person as he/she is the most conscious one about that secret source. He explains that laughing breaks the seriousness that should exist to classify owners from serfs and people from God and to give high rank possessors and oppressors the sacredness and immunity against all attempts of violation.

Many centuries later, slaves' liberation movements and revolts against social classification could liberate people from the extremely ugly behaviors of oppression and dictatorship but laughter remains a critical issue in America till very recently especially for African Americans. Laughter of the oppressed is tragic because it appears within the thorns of trauma and despair whereas the laughter of the oppressor is directed to strengthen the discrimination and prejudice of the oppressed. The tragic laughter appears to interrupt the structure of oppression and it is called by the writer Jackeline Bussie as the 'laughter of the oppressed' and by the American political writer James C. Scott as the 'hidden transcripts' and the 'weapon of the weak'. The two writers focus on the relation between laughter and resistance, defense and interruption whereas Mikhail Bakhtin focuses more

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on the relation between laughter, identity deconstruction and fear subversion.

The focus of the paper is to decipher the codes that minority people are imposed to use to be integrated in their societies and the process they have to be to get their identities shaped and constructed with no limitations. The purpose is to explain how to use laughter as an instrument of freedom from fear and oppression, as a resistance key and defense mechanism. Laughter functions better when oppression decreases and vanishes in social connections and group interactions.

#### **IV.1. Laughter and Identity Deconstruction:**

Laughter and identity have rarely been coupled in research mainly because researchers tend to study laughter across cultural, social or linguistic contexts but the relation between laughter and identity deconstruction is not an over studied issue. The Scottish philosopher and sociologist Hugh Dalziel Duncan confesses:

A person's 'own' identity cannot be completely abstracted from his identity for others. ... 'Identity' is that whereby one feels one is the same, in this place, this time as at that time and at that place, past or future.

(1953: 24)

The identity issue is not as simple and plain as it looks like; it is far more complicated from what it proves to be. Scholars have been studying that concept for centuries from various perspectives in order to highlight its obscure characteristics. Identity is not necessarily restricted in the external picture of who you are, your gender, origin, personality, beliefs, appearance, behaviors, attitudes and convictions only, it may go further to include them all. Studies about the subject introduce other similar concepts as being, existence, self and personality; they enchain the 'body and soul' or the 'insideness with the outsideness' as the

constituents of one's identity. George Herbert Mead (1967) works on the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' when the latter means the assumption of one's attitudes of the other and the first stands for one's response to the other's attitudes. The 'I' is more spontaneous and initiative but the 'Me' is the cognitive reflection, that is to say the other's attitudes you respond to influences your assumption of the other's attitudes. This statement is highly important because it involves one's identity in one's eyes and in others' eyes from his and their attitudes.

Mikhail Bakhtin explains the relation between laughter and identity at the basis of the link found between identity and fear deconstructing on the one hand then identity and liberty appeal on the other. In his book *Rabelais and His World* fact, people automatically relate laughter with the absence of seriousness in the context where individuals share laughs as if laughter is expected to give one the right to surpass the limits with whom he/she interacts but Bakhtin believes the opposite: "*True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny serious-ness but purifies and completes it*" (1984: 123). The writer goes further to emphasize the necessity of laughter to break the many barriers that social standards establish between individuals; laughter has the power to violate the determination of dogmatism and the strict institutionalized heritage that sets social classifications on no basis.

Moreover, Bakhtin is among the few intellectuals who believe in the close relation between the three concepts: laughter, fear, and freedom and he explains the way that relation transcends to the identity deconstruction quest: "*Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter. Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world.*" (Id: 47). According to the writer, laughter is a mode of liberation and it can be correct only when one is completely able to break his fears and get detached from the chains of censorship, superiority and oppression. When

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the individual's freedom is determined by rituals, behaviors and attitudes of others, he/she can by no means claim his total control over his/her life and choices especially when his laughter is tragically produced within conditions of inferiority and submission. If one lacks the complete freedom to laugh or cry whenever he/she needs to, it means he/she is determined by his fears and expectations. Bakhtin adds:

Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power. It unveils the material bodily principle in its true meaning. Laughter opened men's eyes on that which is new, on the future.

(Id: 94)

Laughter breaks the consciousness of superior people who prevent ordinary individuals from having the right to laugh, share laughs or even dare to laugh in their presence. It is the most oppressive cultural law that they impose on slaves and employees; and it stems from the need to protect seriousness and the fear from God first then superiors second. Laughter is the only way to free humans from fear and oppression, from devout chains and piety standards that do not intend to prevent classifications and segregation as much as they strive to establish them strongly.

Laughter is a weapon to unveil the truth and reflect reality with no space for ambivalence, but when it turns into seriousness, truth is destroyed and oppression becomes the only discourse of attack and defense. It is a war of oppressed and

oppressors, victims and enemies and each part has to defeat and overcome the other and turn it to inferior and despicable using the available weapons. For the oppressed, laughter is a disguised strategy to let the superior doubt and feel inferior and submissive and this is the transformative influence recommended by the tragic laughter. Bakhtin assures:

Laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth; it cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils....This is why laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the People. It always remained a free weapon in their hand.(Id: 94)

#### **IV.2.Laughter as a Resistance Key and a Defense Mechanism**

Jackeline Bussie is one of the researchers who direct their scope of study toward the theological dimension of the subject to explain the tragic laughter and what she calls as 'Laughter from below'. Laughter itself has already been overanalyzed as a sound, its source and its effects culturally and socially. However, the 'laughter of the other' has rarely been taken into consideration especially when coupled with the topic of identity construction and deconstruction. She has been one of the first researchers to give a religious explanation and ethical overviewing of the subject trying to solve and answer certain questions such as: how can a human being laugh at the painful, the ugly, the horrible and the suffering of the other? Where might the ethical standards govern the individual's behavior if not at that situation? People's suffering under oppression, slavery and discrimination can never be a humorous subject that drives laughter. Why is the powerful white male the frequently spread picture of the laughing human

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regardless of the different genders, the various races and the social classes?

Viewing laughter from that perspective is extremely important because it uncovers its function that it interrupts the system of oppression prioritized by oppressors to keep having their privileges at the expense of the submissive people. It also helps understand the traditions that the oppressed and wretched follow to keep their laughter unheard and quiet. Bussie's article and book about laughter of the oppressed people has given much importance to the religious characterization of that category of people. Baby Suggs laughter is explained in the light of Bussie's theological perspective because the intended laughter in the novel is found mainly in the religious 'Clearings'.

For non- traditional modes of oppression, the oppressed is required to utilize non- traditional modes of resistance to be victorious. When the context is tragic and the defense is a trouble making step, the weapon of the wretched would be laughter rather than anger. The tragic laughter is that type of laughter in which the person is forcefully lead to laugh though his he/she is about to cry; it is the one that comes in the midst of trauma and despair. In the context of oppression, the disenfranchised rejects the established conventions of domination and the discriminatory system because his awaken and conscious spirit supports none of it. The wretched can hardly demonstrate anger in a violent gesture or aggressive reaction because he/she would succumb his life to pay for it. Laughter can reach the same result intelligently when reacting to practices of discrimination, the effect will be greater and the wound deeper. Laughter strengthens resistance, hope and defense; it is the only way to turn the enemy weak, inferior and humorous. It is a silent killer as it diminishes the oppressor's dominating consciousness and deconstructs his self-esteem; it is the easiest way to overcome him and proves that triumph is also possible through the spiritual power not the physical. She confirms: "*Laughter interrupts the system and state*

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*of oppression, and creatively attests to hope, resistance, and protest in the face of the shattering of language and traditional frameworks of thought and belief*” (2008: 103).

Laughter in tragic contexts for African Americans resisting slavery is similar to the one of Jews resisting the Holocaust because both categories experienced extremely difficult situations and found no way out of them except focusing on the oppressor's vulnerable features and challenging his domination with provocative laughter or stirring silence. Bussie mentions in her book that one of the Holocaust survivors confesses: “*Look, without humor we would have all committed suicide. We made fun of everything. What I'm actually saying is that it helped us remain human, even under hard conditions.*” (2007: 43). Suicide is the expected consequence if the suffering person is put under the pressure of domination for a long time with no instrumental aids to resist and survive. This can also be correct for blacks in the USA whose theological refuge and spiritual power inhales their anger and turns it into a systematic revolting response that is both nonviolent and effective; it is laughter that Bussie calls the ‘tragic laughter’. It gives people hope to keep resisting because it would defeat the whites’ consciousness of superiority and domination conceptualization. Moreover, laughter helps blacks to construct their consciousness, impose their reconsideration and glorify the black identity the same way the white identity is valued.

### **V-The Female Character Baby Suggs’Laughter:**

In Morrison's *Beloved*, black characters attempt to strengthen their struggle to resist slavery and its destructive psychological, emotional and spiritual consequences. The novel entails many characters, some laughing, others weeping but Baby Suggs remains the most important one among them because she is the spiritual healer of blacks in her small community. Sixo's laughter is similarly important as all of his friends remember his exceptional laughter, singing and shouting. Even when he dies,

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his laughter does not betray him, it is blacks' particular way to resist, to defend, to keep alive, to forget the pain and grief and move forward. Baby Suggs always struggles to bring life, hope and light to the hearts of the others being lovely, active and welcoming. She has turned the house into a lionizing destination for all the depressed, the tired and the weak to be healed only with words:

*"Because slave life had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue," she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart"* (Id: 102)

She changes the picture of the submissive unable black female whose purpose, importance and function are frequently determined by the white owner or the black partner. She gets the name Suggs from her husband and would not like to change it to honor him. She loses all her eight children including Halle, Sethe's husband, but she seldom expresses her sadness or tears. She is called Jenny by her white owner without saying that is not her name till the last day she is to be freed. Her son Halle takes over the promise to work during the weekends to pay for her freedom, a precious and expensive freedom that liberates one and doubly imprison another.

Baby Suggs discovers that she has been sold under the name Jenny and that everybody calls her Jenny while her real name is different. It is a question of identity when somebody's name is altered without his interference: *"Mr. Garner, why you all call me Jenny?"* She asks. (Id: 142). *"That's what's on your sales ticket"* (Ibid) The white owner replies. She lives with the family for many years and never questions, criticizes or rejects that name till the last moment before she is freed. She keeps wondering and reflecting but she lacks the courage to ask about it though the white family members have been nice to her. After the horrifying event of the murdered child Beloved, Baby Suggs turns from a lively energetic woman who celebrates ceremonies and invites everybody to laugh and dance

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into a silent burning woman. She holds gatherings for all blacks to meet, discuss, reflect and enjoy their black rituals and religious beliefs but she becomes a submissive weakened lady who withdraws herself from all community events. Sending Sethe to jail worsens the situation but the deadly blow is when the boys leave the house; she sticks to her bed till she dies sleeping. Slavery got the best of her years and her memories.

What is exceptional about Baby Suggs is not only her ability to show and orient her black community toward their self-recognition and self-consideration; but she is also responsible for challenging and changing the theological tendency and the religious rituals of the town. Baby Suggs is important also because she decides to initiate a specific religious tradition that is restricted only to black men and women. She is extremely generous that she celebrates meetings where everybody is invited to share her fruits and grapes and her joy of the harvest season. She thinks of the others before she thinks of herself because she decides to devote her time and life to her people after she gets her freedom. Because black people used to be deprived of the right to worship God the way they like, they used to be deprived the access to the church that teaches people to be tolerant, helpful and forgiving. It is the whites' institutionalized religion that marginalizes the minority from getting inside the Church and asking God for penance and purification, this is what Baby Suggs and her people definitely reject. They refuse to enter the Church that recognizes racial segregation and marginalizes the blacks though it is supposed to establish standards of equality and brotherhood, it is another terrible discriminatory instrument in the hands of the whites.

The religious differentiation between the black skin and the white mask is what drives her to start what she calls the 'Clearings' that are simple gathering where all blacks meet in the forest on Sundays. The meetings are an opportunity for black men and women to dance, sing, shout, weep, share painful

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moments and recall memories, discuss political issues and religious beliefs. They are also a precious space where they support each other and clear their hearts from hatred, jealousy and grudge. According to Baby Suggs, it proves to be an obligation that they establish their own religious particularity because the whites have already deprived them from the Christian Church and from sharing theological qualities and religious talks. Everybody loves the holy woman who sacrifices her life for the good of her community, she solves their problems, stops their quarrels and supports them during their sorrows.

However, the woman turns to be a deadly body walking aimlessly, a ghost without a soul and a dark silhouette after the murder incident. She can hardly accept the loss of Beloved after the immense loss of her own children though she spends a considerable period as a freed slave advising others to be patient, free of any outrageous indignation toward the whites. In fact, he declares before being free: *"Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed... and broke my hearts rings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks."*(Id: 89). Freedom teaches her a great lesson about tolerance and coexistence with oppressors, then she struggles to transmit her knowledge to the others through the 'Clearings' and through one important behavior that is laughter. She wants to teach them that through laughter, they can resist and support the difficulties of life and the prejudice of people.

Black Americans reject the whites' hegemony of all its forms even religiously. They developed their own religion which is held out of the institutionalized churches of whites aiming to deconstruct white theology, domination and oppressive consciousness. Slaves make their own Christianity because they want to serve God the way they like (Invisible Institution of Religion, the woods' Clearings) and this is how they seek constructing their own identity, the Black identity. A very important image is provided in the novel about laughter and

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identity quest, it is the loud laughter that Baby Suggs makes when she realized that she has been sold as a slave in a name that is not her real name neither her husband's name. Jenny is the name found on her sales ticket and has been used by the white owners since then without her criticism or claim. She answers people when they call her Jenny though it is not her name; she has not dare to ask whose name it is. The individual's name says who he/she is, people might say what is in a name to make it crucially important; it remains a name. However, one's name is one's identity, personality and beingness. Without a name, one is unknown, ignored or invisible like Ralph Ellison's 'invisible unnamed man. Slaves were not given names, it was the case because they were considered as animals and they did not need any names. It is absolutely a question of identity when the person is not given a name or his real name is altered forcefully by his employer, this is what happens to Baby Suggs and she reacts with a loud laughter in two situations.

In the first situation, she remembers to ask about the given name only few minutes before she is being freed, this means that she prepares for a new life and a new identity because she has been deprived from them as a slave: "*Why you all call me Jenny?*" (Id: 142). The oppressed Baby Suggs asks and Mr. Garner replies smiling: "*Cause that what's on your sales ticket, gal. Ain't that your name? What you call yourself?*" She confesses at last: "*Nothings, I don't call myself nothing.*" (Ibid) then she laughed loudly. This statement illustrates the potential relation between one's identity and name, and the opportunity given to the oppressor to deconstruct the oppressed identity through the prevention of names. Laughter comes to assure the new beginning and the intention to declare the new identity, the Black identity. Baby Suggs' laughter is not the result of defeat but the consequence of victory and triumph that she is on the first step toward freedom and identity construction process, her laughter is a source of power not weakness, of audacity not

submission. It is a tragic hopeful laughter that predicts the long path she has to go through in order to claim herself as a free strong black female. With her laughter, she destroys the discriminatory barriers that stand between whites and blacks, and deconstructs the oppressive consciousness for the sake of constructing the black female identity.

In the second situation, she demonstrates an extraordinary joy and laughs loudly as she realizes that her body becomes her own after she is made free, her legs and arms are hers and they belong to her, not to her employer any longer. She expresses her happiness: "*These my hands. ... My heart's beating*" (Id: 141). The writer describes the confusion of feelings Baby Suggs experiences at the frontiers between her previous life and the coming one, happiness is mingled with hope but despair always lays down as a foundation.

"These my hands". Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud. Mr. Garner looked over his shoulder at her with wide brown eyes and smiled himself. "What's funny, Jenny?" She couldn't stop laughing. "My heart's beating," She said. And it was true. Mr. Garner laughed. . . She covered her mouth to keep from laughing too loud. (Ibid)

She laughs loudly because she discovers she has the right to use her body the way she likes to without orders or limits; she is even surprised to hear the beats of her heart as if it has never beaten

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before. She laughs loudly to declare her beingness and existence until she feels the need to cover her mouth and silence her laughs. Her laughter signals that Baby Suggs at that moment exactly realizes her double transformative consciousness being a slave on the one hand and a free woman on the other, a situation she has not experienced before this is why she is lost in between.

At last, she attempts to hide or silence her laughter as it is threatening the presence of the white employer; it interrupts the respect that she has to show him until the last moment of her slavery phase. In other words, even when she laughs, the black woman is forced to silence the sound and hide the effects which simply entails that total freedom is not guaranteed anyway. That statement is illustrated once again in the murdering act when Sethe is followed by Schoolteacher to be brought back to slavery causing her to kill her baby in an attempt to protect her from the same miserable life of slaves. People hide when they feel scared to reveal, and standing on the edge between two times, the past and the future and between two worlds the world of freedom and the world of slavery creates a new space where the woman feels to be part of both and part of none at the same time; this is why it is a paradoxical laughter that ends the trauma by silencing and hiding.

Moreover, laughter is also a crucially effective weapon used to achieve other goals; it plays a crucial role in the 'Clearings'. The preacher Baby Suggs uses it to motivate and support black men and women to survive and resist; and this is the aim of the religious 'Clearings'. She experiences two phases successively in her life: being a slave and being a free woman, this is the reason behind establishing the gatherings that should be based mainly on sharing laughter. She realizes that the accumulation of anger has no end and it leads to nowhere, then she decides to let her people try something different and contradicting. The preacher reflects: "*Surrender was bound to come anyway, why not meet it with a laugh, shouting Seven-O!*"

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*Why not? Why the delay?"* (Id: 219). Laughter should not be delayed because life does not wait and death has no patience when it comes. If sorrows would come anyway, why should one besiege himself within the negative expectations and deprive himself the greatness of joy even though that joy is mixed up with tears.

During these 'Clearings', the present men, women and children share laughs and weeps though these are cries of pain rather than cries of joy but the holy woman asks them to dance, sing and laugh. They exchange roles and actions spontaneously as she is watching them proudly because she is assured that she contributes in the making of the Black identity through these practices. She believes and strives to exert her efforts to help her people find their place in their country, shape the Black identity and crystallize the essence of their existence. Baby Suggs keeps shouting and asking children to laugh loudly again and again: *"Let your mothers hear you laugh, she shouted"* (Id: 88). Morrison describes the 'Clearings' processing and exchanges attractively:

It started like that: "laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.(Ibid)

Furthermore, laughter is also a grace because sinners attend the 'Clearings' and pray to God to forgive them. As a religious preacher, Baby Suggs shows no intention to punish the

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wrongdoers or spread their deeds in the community. She asks them to confess, reveal the truth then stop doing the bad deeds with an open heart to listen and a welcoming laughter to understand. Laughter is then a spontaneous merciful response to attract black men and women to stay together and form their present and future together. Besides, blacks believe that laughter, though it is tragic, is a mode of survival because it is through laughter that they can stand in the face of evil and confront sadness and despair. They need a weapon to resist and fight; they can hardly find what is better than laughter. It serves as a defense mechanism too because when the oppressor attacks strongly, the oppressed can do nothing more than to avoid the harsh blow. Laughter diminishes the effects, reduces the pain and strengthens the defense ability of the oppressed and allows him/ her to transcend his/ her fears, despair and tragic pain.

## **VI-CONCLUSION:**

Laughter is sign of happiness and joy; it holds the broader sense of pleasure, satisfaction and intimacy. It is not only an external mode of truth but it is also an internalized picture of harmony and conformity. However, laughter of the oppressed people all over the world is completely different because it emerges out of their pain and despair. It is the result of silence, patience and submission they demonstrate to the oppressing forces that attribute power to themselves according to virtual standards they have only in their minds.

The tragic laughter is a flower of hope in the dark world of dehumanization; it is a key of resistance and empowerment and a defense mechanism for the weak to get. Besides, the African American woman is the best example to depict that type of laughter because she attempts to laugh at the very sorrowful moments to break the chains of oppression and to defend her existence. Laughter of the wretched is a challenge of a weakened individual to construct his identity and deconstruct the oppressor's consciousness of superiority and superficial sublimity.

Moreover, laughing at the pain of the distinguished, at the sorrows of the ugly, at the tears of the suffering people has no human merits because it is merely a striving attempt to deepen the bloody wound. The oppressed definitely has the right to reject and find a flower of hope, of resistance and love through the path of freedom and equality. Laughter has been a light candle for the African American female to protect her family and her black community from terror, fear and despair; this is what the author Toni Morrison struggles to transmit through her black characters as Baby Suggs in *'Beloved'*. The beloved is the woman whose laughter is a key to liberation and justice, to a new world for the black minority toward a better future, a future that will not segregate nor punish the colored ones merely because they were born with a different skin color.

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