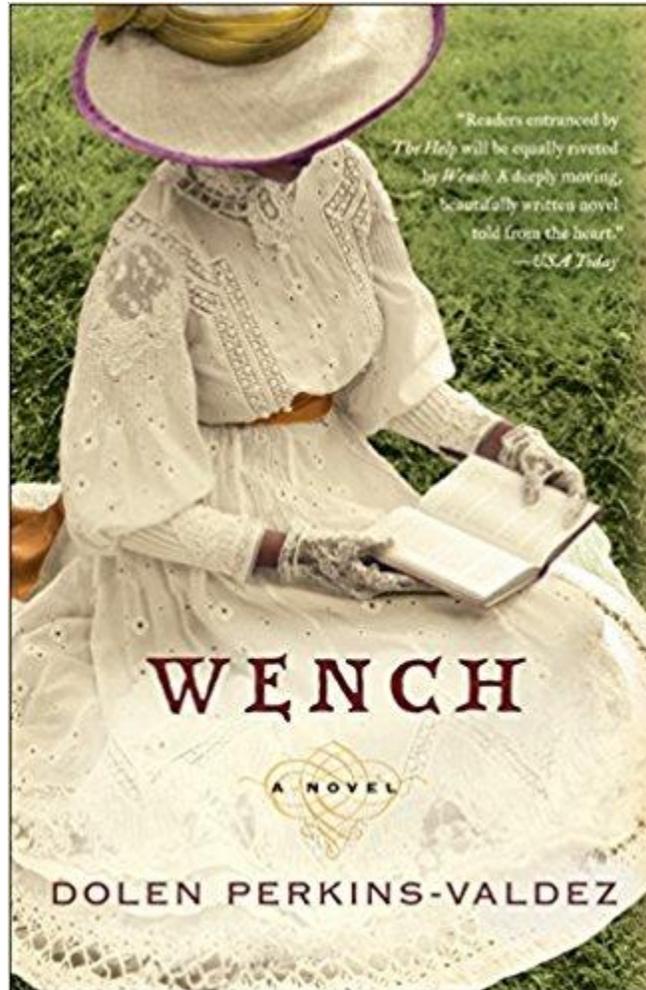


Degradation through Slavery in Dolen Perkins Valdez's *Wench*

N. Suganthi, M.Phil. Scholar



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Wench-Novel-Dolen-Perkins-Valdez/dp/006170654X>

Abstract

This paper presents on Dolen Perkins Valdez's *Wench*. It takes place in Ohio, a free territory before the Civil War, Tawawa House. This novel is about four enslaved women who act as mistress to their masters during the four years of summer when they visit the Tawawa house

resort in the Northern free state of Ohio. This paper focuses on the Degradation of Slavery which concentrates on four enslaved women who have been suffered at the hands of their masters. One of the slave women has trapped her into the life of slavery because of her love she had towards her master Drayle but others have tried to reach out the freedom. The emotional and psychological bond has bound the slave to their masters. This paper intended to analyse the sufferings of slave and the dominant power of white over the slave's women.

Introduction

African American literature focuses on the writings of the African people who were living in America. This literature came into focus only after the African Americans' have placed in American society. The literature begins with the works of such late 18th Century writers as Phillis Wheatley. African American writing presents the experience of African who had faced racism, slavery and social equality. In the United States the African peoples are considered as slaves who were allotted to serve the white.

Slavery in America

Before the American Civil War the literature primarily consisted of memoirs by people who had escaped from slavery. Slave narratives a kind of genre in the 19th century which includes the life of people who are under slavery and the path of justice and redemption to freedom. This genre developed in the middle of the 19th century which focuses on the lives of slaves in the South and it also describes the cruelties of life under slavery.

In America, slavery begins when the first African slaves were brought to the North American Colony of Jamestown Virginia in 1619. African American authors have expressed their experience they had in America about slavery, racism, white supremacy, and inequality through their writings. From 1830's to 1860's a movement started to abolish slavery in America gained strength in the Northern United States, led by free blacks such as Frederick Douglass and white supporters such as William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe who published the antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). This novel depicts the reality of slavery which asserts love can overcome something as destructive as enslavement of fellow human beings.

After the Legal Abolition of Slavery

After the end of slavery and the American Civil War the number of African American writers continued to write about the conditions of African American in the country. The degradation of slavery deprived their humanity and did not permit to achieve their full human potential. Slavery is awful because it violates the rights of men and women as individuals and then it denies their freedom. Slavery degrades individuals by treating them as beast, as property that can be bought and sold. The majority of slaves remain bound to their masters for an indefinite period of time with no possibility of redemption or liberty.

Wench

Dolen Perkins-Valdez is an African American novelist born in Memphis, Tennessee. Her works are *Wench* (2010), and *Balm* (2015). She was awarded the first Novelist Award by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association.

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The story of *Wench* is about the lives of four Southern slave women who act as mistresses to their masters. Lizzie is the protagonist of the novel, who never wants to give up her love had towards her master. Reenie, Sweet, and Mawu are the other enslaved women who want to escape from the slavery. The story deals with the sufferings of the enslaved women who are living under the white masters. The entire novel depicts the problem of enslaved women who are suffering in America.

Four Women Slaves – Focus of the Novel

The characters in the novel have encountered the problem of slavery. The four slaves are brought by their white master to the Southern state during the summer vacation. The white master use to have vacation every summer with their black enslaved women. The four-enslaved women Lizzie, Sweet, Reenie, and Mawu who is a new slave to the resort.

Mawu seems to be a stranger for the other slaves because they are regulars to the summer vacation and the three becomes friends over the years but Mawu ia a new slave woman to the resort for the summer vacation. Mawu is a bold enough to face her cruel master than the other slaves. She is the one who tried to escape from the resort and wants to run away from her cruel master Tip, because Mawu’s situation is different from other slaves. Her situation is far worse than the other women. Tip, her master used her as a object for his need to be fulfilled. Mawu has given four children to Tip.

She’d given Tip four children, but he’d sold three of them out- right. The last child left was a four-year-old boy with a lazy blue eye. He’d been dropped as a child-fallen out of the cloth tying him to Mawu’s back while she worked in the fields. The ground might have served as a cushion as it was still soggy from the previous night’s rain, but the baby had the bad fortune of hitting his head on a rock hiding amid the cornstalks. (141)

Treatment of Women Slaves

The situation of women slaves was worst – they wre treated like a beast. In society the peoples have used beast for their purpose and they used as a mode of business. As like here the white maters have used the slaves to beget children, so that they could sell the children and make money out of it. This was the situation for all the slaves who faced the struggles against their masters. The situation makes Mawu to run away from the place. But Lizzie warned Mawu to, not to think about running from the resort. Because if she caught that the end of all of their life. If they caught none of them will be return so they never have a thought of running from the resort.

Escapes

The other slaves never used to talk about or even think about to run away from the place. After the arrival of Mawu the situation changes in their life. She tries to convince the other slave women to run away with her, but they feel afraid to leave their master. They know if they have tried to run away they would be beaten and sold off to the cruel master or even killed.

One day Mawu decided to escape from the resort, but she was caught and beaten by her master in front of all the slaves as a warning. By seeing this other slaves, except Lizzie have started to think about the freedom by the influence of Mawu. The white men always use to degrade the slaves and they never allowed to reach out their freedom. There are three ways to act when the slaves are in the company of strange white man except their masters. Lizzie said:

Don't look them in the eye. In fact, pretend they're not there. Walk a wide circle around them unless your master tells you otherwise.

Don't look them in the eye, but wait on them without being asked. Get their water before they even know they're thirsty.

Don't look them in the eye, but answer. And if four eyes should meet their eyes, give them a stern look that lets them know you are not available for their whims.
(79)

The slaves used to value most about their families and friends because if they are ready to run, is to leave behind everything. The slaves never used to enjoy the sophisticated life as like the white people. Though they are brought to the new city for vacation they are not allowed to have vacation, but their masters used to have a vacation at Tawawa House in Ohio. As slaves they are instructed to do chores and have to do work at the hotel. The four slaves are asked to stay within a cottage and they are instructed not to across the river they had near cottage. One day with the help of Mawu they have heard about the idea of abolition for the first time. So they started to examine the idea of freedom, except Lizzie others wants to reach out the freedom.

The slaves always used to serve and work for the whites. The whites are considered the black slaves women as their mistresses but not their wife this shows their dominant power or supremacy over the slaves. Slaves are always suppressed by the white race and their voice are always been hidden and unspoken among themselves. Their happiness, freedom and identity are stolen by the white.

As Objects

Slaves become objects for the white that can be used and disposed of without regard for their feelings. In Africa the slaves used to eat with their hands and they never allowed to eat in the plates and spoon. "Drayle's wife, Miss Fran, said slaves should eat with their hands because that was the way they did it in Africa" (20). Slave women came across so much of predicaments in their life which is not to be solved.

Freedom is basic human rights of every individual. But for the slaves freedom is far from their life. In this novel Mawu who finds the way to escape from the cruel master and to reach out the freedom of life. Though freedom is a basic human right of an individual, slaves struggle to find their freedom of life. In Richard and Keneth Kinnamon's *Black Writers in America*, it is stated that "For many a slave especially in the Upper south, the surest solution to his Slave status was to escape it. From the beginning if slavery in America, slaves had fled their master" (60).

None wants to be a slave for anyone, but the situation changes their lives to be as a slave for others to fulfill their needs. In the case of African American they struggled to prove their identity and they came across many hardships to achieve their goal. Though the slaves have undergone the pain in a white society they have courage to overcome and raise voice against the white men. Until they have not raised against them still slavery will exist and still they have to be serve for the whites. So, they have to struggle to come out of slavery to reach the peaceful life. In some case the slaves have a hope to reach the freedom. But they should consider a hope as a medium of success to attain their goal and to work for their freedom.

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