

## I. Melville and His Works: A Critical Observation

Herman Melville was born on the 1st August, 1819 in the city of New York. His father, Allan Melville, was a prosperous merchant; and his mother, Maria Gansevoort, came from a wealthy Dutch family which had long been resident in New York State. In fact, both the parents of Herman Melville were descended from highly respectable and honoured ancestors. However, by the time Herman Melville attained the age of nine, his father suffered heavy business losses and became bankrupt. The family, with eight children of whom Herman was the third, felt compelled to quit New York City and move to Albany where Herman joined the Albany Academy. Allan Melville died in 1832, a victim of insanity caused by financial setbacks. After his father's death Herman had to quit the Albany Academy where he had studied for just three years. The family being in very straitened circumstances, Herman had to look for a job and found one as a clerk in a bank. But he did not stick to the job and in 1834 went to work on an uncle's farm. At the age of eighteen he got a job as an elementary school teacher. But the work did not last long. Another teaching position not being in sight, there appeared no alternative but to follow the example of several of his cousins who had worked as sailors on merchant ships or whalers. His four months as a sailor on ship constituted a valuable training in the life that was to take shape in his novels.

After brief interlude as a sailor, Melville returned to a school-master's job which lasted only for a few months. In the autumn of 1840 he went to New York, utterly destitute and facing a crisis in his life. As an office clerkship did not attract him in the least, he returned to Massachusetts and got a job on a three-masted whaling ship called *Acushnet*. He later recorded his experiences on ship in his book *White Jacket*. One of the officers in the *United States* struck him as very kind and large-

hearted; and he immortalized him in *Billy Bud*, the last story he wrote in his life. In October 1844, after about fourteen months' voyage from Honolulu, the United States dropped anchor in Boston Harbour, where Melville was discharged as a Captain, and soon he rejoined his family at Lansingburgh on the Hudson.

Melville turned his experiences as a sailor to account by producing two books—*Typee* in 1846, and *Omoo* in 1847. Both books proved an enormous success. Later on, Melville started reading great authors like Rabelais, Burton, Coleridge, Sir Thomas Browne, and Shakespeare. In 1856, he published his book *Benito Cereno*. To keep money flowing into his pockets, he dashed off two more books based on his experience: *Redburn* (1849), and *White Jacket* based on his final journey in a man-of-war. Throughout 1850 and for several months in 1851, Melville was busy writing a book which, in his own words, was a romance of adventure founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries. Efforts to find a consular job for him abroad proved fruitless. In this predicament Melville turned to the popular magazines for ready income and began to write short stories. In 1860, Melville went on a sea voyage to San Francisco by the clipper *Meteor* under the command of his younger brother Tom. He tried again for a diplomatic post, but in vain. So he hurried home by steamer. Then the civil war broke out in America. He tried vainly to get a commission in the navy. In 1863 he sold whatever was left of his estate in Pittsfield, and went to New York. He had no desire to write any more fiction. So he took to writing verses, and the stimulus to do so came from the American Civil War. Robert Spiller writes:

From 1846 to 1852 Melville wrote and published furiously; from 1853 to 1857 he continued to write, not much of his imaginative abandon had given way to critical uncertainties; from 1858 to the end of his life, a period of over thirty years, he lapsed into comparative silence and his

novels were almost forgotten. Melville had been a writer of promise, but the early praise was soon forgotten. The most admiration for Melville has resulted in an extraordinary variety of critical opinions regarding his works and their interpretations. Culniffe traces five formative influences in his literary career; the religious orthodoxy of his home which left its imprint, though he revolted from it; his contact with the brutalities of a sailor's life and with savage societies which impelled him to question the premises of western civilization; his reading in philosophy and works of literature. (110)

*Benito Cereno* opens aboard the *Bachelor's Delight*, an American sealer and merchant ship anchored near a deserted island off the southern coast of Chile. Scanning the horizon, Amasa Delano, the vessel's captain, observes a strange ship apparently in need of aid. Delano boards his whaleboat, has some supplies loaded, and makes his way to the craft, a decaying Spanish merchant vessel called the *San Dominick*. Once on board, Delano sees that the crew is in a dismal state and that the ship carries a number of black slaves, many of whom, much to Delano's surprise, are not shackled. He speaks with Don Benito Cereno, the ship's grave and sickly captain, who assures him that the slaves are docile. Sending his boat back for additional supplies and new sails, Delano remains on the *San Dominick* and attempts to discover from the tight-lipped Cereno what has caused the currently bleak condition of his craft and crew. After some time, Cereno--who is constantly attended by Babo, his short Negro slave--explains that the *San Dominick* met with severe weather off Cape Horn and has endured bouts of sickness and scurvy that killed most of the Spanish crew and passengers, including Don Alexandro Aranda, the slave owner. Nothing that the weather has been calm of late, Delano begins to suspect that the Spaniard may be

mentally as well as physically ill. That evening, Delano dines with Cereno and Babo, and finds that he is unable to convince the Spaniard to send Babo out of the room. After dinner, Babo shaves the extremely nervous and agitated Cereno, nicking his neck slightly with his blade. Later, Delano discovers that Babo has received a small cut on his cheeks as well, which he claims was given him by Cereno. Delano's whaleboat returns and, as the American prepares to depart, Cereno, having previously refused to join him aboard the *Bachelor's Delight*, desperately springs into the waiting craft. A shocked Delano looks up to see Babo wielding a knife. Once back at Delano's ship, Cereno explains to Delano that the slaves had mutinied shortly after the San Dominick left port. The Americans then pursue the stolen vessel, subdue the mutineers, and set sail for Lima, where a trial is held. Babo is hanged, and Don Cereno enters a nearby monastery. He dies some three months after giving his court deposition.

Melville's freely adapted *Benito Cereno*, is highly-regarded an ironic tale of a slave mutiny at sea, from an episode in Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere* (1817). Ostensibly a story of mystery on the high seas, *Benito Cereno* demonstrates Melville's subtle narrative manipulation of Delano's historical account of an 1805 slave uprising. In the story, Melville presents a naïve protagonist who stumbles upon the remnants of a violent rebellion, but fails to recognize the horrors that have occurred. Considered by critics to be one of Melville's finest stories for its symbolic richness and narrative complexity, *Benito Cereno* is additionally acknowledged for its skilled thematic depiction of human depravity and moral relativism.

Scholars have forwarded a number of theories regarding the tale of the novel *Benito Cereno*, with most acknowledging that Melville's narrative, while complex and

ambiguous, presents a critique of slavery and the systems of tyrannical oppression that lead men to commit horrible depravity. A related strain in the story involves Melville's denigration of colonial expansionism and warns of the lurking dangers associated with the widespread American belief in Manifest Destiny during the mid nineteenth-century. Focusing on the figure of Amasa Delano it can be said that in *Benito Cereno* one can see Melville's complex use of narrative structure and his portrayal of the story's naïve and highly credulous protagonist, who is unable to comprehend the evils that Babo and his fellow slaves have performed upon their former captors. One can also see in the work a subtle critique of historical narrative as a medium of truth, given Delano's inability and unwillingness to perceive that a slave revolt has occurred aboard the *San Dominick* and that many of its original crew members have been slain. Thus, Melville's manipulation of Amasa Delano's historical narrative as a text that purports itself as a factual account calls into question the notion of historical and indeed moral truth, as well as the ordinary separation between historical fact and fiction.

Right since the time of publication of the novel *Benito Cereno*, numbers of critics have commented on different perspective of the texts. Eric J. Sandquist discussion of the very text places Melville's tale convincingly within the American 1850s. Sandquist suggests:

The governing figure of Melville's narrative method as well as his historical vision is a type of tautology that, authorities or meaning, effectively collapses proslavery and antislavery arguments, thereby replicating the paralysis, paranoia and stagecraft by which slavery was maintained in the immediate antebellum years. (143-53)

Similarly, commenting on the racial and cultural bias that Delano clearly exhibits, Huss writes, “Cereno’s deposition invariably characterizes the Africans as heartless murders and the Spanish slave-drivers as virtuous Christians” (qtd. in Pahl 180).

*Benito Cereno* gives ample testimony to Melville’s interest in keeping a vigilant eye not only on the violence inherent in, and resulting from, the institution of slavery, but also on the epistemic violence inherent within any narrative construction of that institution’s past, says Dennis Pahl. Moreover, Huss says:

In “*Benito Cereno*” Melville illustrates a notion of history in fact very much similar to the sort of discontinuous and irruptive history that Michael Foucault discusses at length in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History.” Here history [...] aims not to discover a continuous past or “a forgotten identity eager to be reborn, but a complex system of distinct and multiple elements, unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis. Like most of Melville’s writing, *Benito Cereno* is largely unappreciated during his lifetime and it was not until a thorough reassessment of his oeuvre was made in the early twentieth century that critics and readers began to take notice of the merits of this work. In the ensuing years, critics have praised Melville’s manipulation of narrative form to create a compelling mystery that delves into the ambiguities of good and evil. Others have remarked upon the technical virtuosity of the tale, as well as Melville’s skillful use of irony and the symbolic imagery of nature. Modern critics have continued to debate the matter of Melville’s opinions on slavery as depicted in the story, though most concede that the author’s intentions are far from racist. *Benito Cereno* is generally considered one of the most brilliantly realized pieces of short narrative fiction in nineteenth-century American literature. *Benito Cereno* is the story of an almost unbearable vulnerability charmed by its ability to displace itself onto the body of the African other, says Paul Downes. Moreover, he

says it was written under the pressure of the escalation of hostility and tension that would culminate in the American civil war. He reiterates that the narrative of Amasa Delano and his confrontation with a Spanish slave ship in distress in the waters off the west coast of Chile in 1805 is an account of what Delano himself thought of as a humanitarian intervention. Melville's story attempts to grapple with precisely the question raised by the ICISS report, namely, the relationship between intervention that gets to be called humanitarian and intervention that is ultimately military -- backed by all the violence that political power is capable of exerting. Furthermore, Melville's attempt to comprehend these dynamics proceeds, simultaneously, by examining the play of vulnerability and power that defines this story's American protagonist, the generous captain Amasa Delano. This examination finds much of its critical leverage, as well as its literary appeal, in Melville's management of narrative voice.

This dissertation sheds light on slavery with the view of post-colonial perspective on the widely read novel *Benito Cereno* by a captain turned novelist Herman Melville.

This research paper has been divided into four chapters: the first chapter deals with a brief introduction of the writer along with an introductory outline of the text and some critical views given by different writers in regard to this text named *Benito Cereno*, the second chapter sorts out the theoretical analysis applied to this research world, in the very chapter the topic of slavery will be discussed at greater aptness with the subaltern criticism by Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and the nature and analysis of slavery by Brooks, the third chapter will centre the discussion on the critical analysis of the text with the help of some remarkable extracts to prove the hypothesis of the study.

Last but not the least; the fourth chapter will conclude the dissertation on the basis of the textual analysis.



## **II. Slave and Slavery: A Postcolonial Perspective**

Although the institution of slavery has existed since classical times and has occurred in many forms in different societies, it was of particular significance in the formation of many post-colonial societies in Africa and the Caribbean.

So far as the term slave and slavery is concerned, it is a socio-economic system under which certain persons-- known as slaves-- are deprived of personal freedom and compelled to perform labour or services. The term also refers to the status or condition of those persons who are treated as the property of another person or household. This is referred to as Chattel Slavery. Slaves are held against their will from the time of their capture, purchase, or birth, and are deprived of the right to leave, to refuse to work, or to receive compensation in return for their labour. As such, slavery is one form of unfree labour.

Slavery predates writing and evidence, for it can be found in almost all cultures and continents. Slavery can be traced to the earliest records, such as the code of Hammurabi in Mesopotamia, which refers to slavery as an already established institution. The forced labour of women in some ancient and modern cultures may also be identified as slavery. Slavery, in this case, includes sexual services.

Historically, most slaves ancestors were initially captured in wars or kidnapped in isolated raids but some were sold into slavery by their parents as a means of surviving extreme conditions. Most slaves were born into that status. Ancient warfare often resulted in slavery for prisoners and their families who were either killed or ransomed as slaves. Captives were often considered the property of those who captured them and were looked upon as a prize of war. Normally they were sold, bartered or ransomed. It originally may have been more humane than simply executing those who would return to fight if they were freed, but the effect led to

widespread enslavement of particular groups of people. Those captured sometimes differed in ethnicity, nationality, religion, or race from their enslavers, but often were the same as the captors. The dominant group in an area might take captives and return them into slaves with little fear of suffering the like fate, but the possibility might be present from reversals of fortunes, as when Seneca warns, at the height of the Roman Empire and when various powerful nations fought among themselves anyone might find himself enslaved. The actual amount of force needed to kidnap individual people for slaves could lead to enslavement of those secure from warfare, as brief sporadic raids or kidnapping often sufficed. St. Patrick recounts in his confession: having been kidnapped by pirates, and the Biblical figure Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers.

Ancient societies characterized by poverty, rampant warfare or lawlessness, famines, population pressures, and cultural and technological lag are frequently exporters of slaves to more developed nations. Today the illegal slave trade (mostly in Africa) deals with slaves who are rural people forced to move to cities, or those purchased in rural areas and sold into slavery in cities. These moves take place due to loss of subsistence agriculture, theft of land, and population increases.

Although outlawed in nearly all countries today slavery is still secretly practised in many parts of the world. There are an estimated 27 million victims of slavery worldwide.

In spite of the long history of slavery, we cannot make the absolute definitions of slavery and we fail to determine who actually is slave. We use these terms to show the relative meaning. Still we do not find consensus of everybody on any definition of slavery. It is not because it is a difficult term, but because it is complex in use and observation. In different contexts, one can be seen as a slave on one side, and the

other the same can be seen as a free person. So the slave and slavery cannot be defined in absolute form, but in a relative context. After all, we all are slave if we are working for others, but, usually we do not like to be called so. Concise Oxford Dictionary defines slave as, “a person who is the legal property of another and is forced to obey them” (285). In some societies slaves were considered movable property, in others immovable property, like real estate.

In the history of slavery, we find different ways to make one slave. One of the most famous ways was through capture in war. In ancient age, people who were kidnapped were dealt as slaves and their offspring became the bondage slave. Some people were enslaved as punishment for their crimes and debts. Many of the children were sold into slavery by their parents/relatives to escape from starvation. Some of the parents started to sell their uneducated children just to escape from them. In the same way, some were self-sold, and it was very common in primitive age.

Slavery in spite of its institutional status could not recognize its long-term negative impact to the very heart of the slaves and forced them to revolt against it with violent means. The main reason behind the revolution against slavery is the loss of cultural identity of the slaves. They had to turn out from their own cultural milieu and abandon their heritage on one side, and on the other they had to accept the enslavers' culture. The tug of war between the slave culture and master culture couldn't turn into a compromising point and it went through resistance and operation.

Slavery was formed in the early days due to the two reasons-- labour shortage on one side, and availability of the open resources. These are known as the pre-requisite for slavery, but the common type of slavery is the domestic slavery, which includes farming and harvesting. This household or domestic slavery later turned into Serfdom. Regarding Serfdom, Britannica writes:

In the past a serf usually was an agriculturalist, whereas depending upon the society, a slave could be employed in almost any occupation ....The Serf, moreover, was usually bound to the land whereas the slave was bound to his owner, i.e. he had to live where his owner told him to, and he often could be beheld by his owner at any time. (286)

The owner could less respect the family life of a Serf than of a slave. In ancient age, poverty paved way to the slavery, for instance, if one was in debt and had no source to pay back it; he had no option except to surrender oneself as a slave to the household of the creditor. The persons who remained unable to pay the borrowed money had to be turned into slavery. They were known as debt slaves, but they were treated worse than slaves. The free slaves were sometimes to be set free with a sum of money, sometimes a plot of land, but debt slaves hardly got such opportunities. The American anti-slavery movement urged all to abolish slavery by voluntarily to reduce the slave culture in the South. The civil war and Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 became the extreme parts of abolition of slavery from the United States.

In understanding the history of slavery, it is mysterious that no slave owner prefers to enslave his own fellows. Every slave master likes to employ other than what he is socially or religiously attached. This is the open secret clue of slavery. Further, Britannica writes:

Most groups whether national or religious, forbade the enslavement of their fellows; thus the Spanish couldn't enslave Arabs and Christian and Muslim couldn't enslave their co-religionist. Besides, he says it is legal attitude of the slave owning that the slave had to be an outsider ordinarily. That is why the slave usually defined as property movable as well fixed depending on the slave owning society. In the same

way the slaves are purchased for different time slots. Some inherent slave, some keep forever and some employ for specific purpose. There are variations of grading slaves based on the use (qtd in Britannica 291).

The history of plantation slavery in the United States began soon after the English Colonialists first settled in what became the United States. Many slaves were free during the American civil war, many by Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation but finally and completely by the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution. Approximately one southern family in four was held slaves prior to war. In addition to African slaves, poor Europeans were brought over in substantial numbers as indentured, particularly in the British thirteen colonies. The citizen of Jamestown, who had themselves arrived from Britain decided to treat the first Africans in Virginia as indentured, servants, the Africans were freed after stated period, given the use of land and supplies by their former masters. The transformation from indentured servitude to racial slavery happened gradually. There are no laws regarding slavery in Virginia's history.

Although outlawed in nearly all countries today slavery is still secretly practised in many parts of the world. There are an estimated 27 million victims of slavery worldwide. The 1926 slavery convention described slavery as-- the status and/or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised. Slaves cannot leave an owner, an employer or a territory without explicit permission (they must have a passport to leave), and they will be returned if they escape. Therefore, a system of slavery-- as opposed to the isolated instances found in any society-- requires official, legal recognition of ownership, or widespread tacit arrangements with local authorities, by masters, who have some influence because of their social and /or economic status. Slaves are people who are

owned and controlled by others in a way that they have almost no rights or freedom of movement and are not paid for their labour, aside from food, clothing and shelter needed for basic subsistence.

According to the anti-slavery society, although there is no longer any state which legally recognizes, or which will enforce, a claim by a person to a right of poverty over another, the abolition of slavery does not mean that it ceased to exist. There are millions of people throughout the world-- mainly children-- in conditions of virtual slavery, as well as in various forms of servitude which are in many respects similar to slavery.

Some argue that the Bible-- particularly the Old Testament-- condones slavery in ancient Israelite society by failing to condemn the widespread practice present in other cultures. It also explicitly states that slavery is morally acceptable, but only under certain circumstances.

Even at the twenty-first century we do not find the absolute abolition of slavery though people from different societies and professions advocate against it. The history of slavery has shown that people including the slaves have organized a number of revolutionary movements against slavery, and the enslavers showed their positive responses to create an environment of reconciliation.

Historian Peter Kolchin writes in *American Historians and Antebellum Southern Slavery*, by breaking up existing families and forcing slaves to relocate far from everyone and everything they knew, this migration replicated many of the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade. Historian Ira Berlin calls this movement The Second Middle Passage in *A History of African American Slave*. Characterizing it as the central event in the life of slave between the American Revolution and the civil war, Berlin writes in *A Documentary History of Emancipation* that whether they were

uprooted themselves or simply lived in fear that they or their families would be involuntarily moved, the massive deportation traumatized black people, both slave and free. Berlin writes: Slave traders had little interest in purchasing or transporting intact slave families, although in the interest of creating a self-reproducing labour force equal member of men and women were transported. Murder and mayhem made the Second Middle Passage almost as dangerous for traders as it was for slaves, which was why the men were chained tightly and guarded closely. The Coffles that marched slaves southward-- like the slave ships that carried their ancestors westwards-- became mobile fortress, and under such circumstances, flight was more common than revolt (qtd in Berlin 127).

The harsh conditions on the frontier increased slave resistance and led to much more reliance on violence by the masters and overseers.

According to both the Pulitzer prize winning historian David Brion Davis and the Marxist historian Eugene Genovese, treatment of slaves whether labouring or walking about in public, people living as slaves were regulated by legally authorized violence. Further, Davis makes the point that:

While some aspects of slavery took on a Welfare Capitalist look  
 Yet we must never forget plantation in the Deep South was essentially ruled by terror. Even the most kindly and humane masters knew that only the threat of violence could force gangs of field hands to work from dawn to dusk, with the discipline, [...] of a regular inefficient labour disorderly conduct, or refused to accept the authority of superior. (26)

The slaves were the legal property of their white masters; it was not unusual for enslaved black women to be raped by their owners, members of their owner's families, or their owner's friends.

The belief that slave-breeding and sexual exploitation destroyed the black family as a myth was all pervasive in that time. A very few abolitionists, such as John Brown favoured the use of armed force to foment uprisings among the slaves, others tried to use the legal system. Robert E. Lee writes:

There are few, I believe, in this enlightened age, who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil. It is idle to expatiate on its disadvantages. Moreover, he says it is a greater evil to the white than to the coloured race. While my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more deeply engaged for the former. The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, physically socially. The painful discipline they are undergoing is necessary for their further instruction as a race, and will prepare them, I hope, for better things. How long their servitude may be necessary is known and ordered by a merciful providence. (qtd. in Lee 98)

John C. Calhoun, in a famous speech in the Senate in 1837, declared that slavery was instead of an evil, a good- a positive good (326). Calhoun supported his view with the following reasoning: in every civilized society one portion of the community must live on the labour of another learning science and the arts. The African slave, kindly treated by his master and mistress and looked after his old age, is better off than the free labours of Europe, and under the slave system conflicts between capital and labour are avoided. The advantages of slavery in this respect,



he concluded, will become more and more manifest, if left undisturbed by interference from without, as the country advances in wealth and numbers (328).

Historian Ira Berlin writes:

In slave societies, nearly everyone-- free and slave-- aspired to enter the slave holding class, and upon occasion some former slaves rose into slaveholders' ranks. Their acceptance was grudging, as they carried the stigma of bondage in their lineage and, in the case of American slavery, colour in their skin. Free blacks were perceived as a continual symbolic threat to slave holders, challenging the idea that black and slave were synonymous. Free blacks were seen as potential allies of fugitive slaves and slave holders bore witness to their fear and loathing of free blacks in no uncertain terms. (53-54)

In the culmination of the slavery purely as victim, Historian M. Elkins in his 1959 work *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, compared United States slavery to the brutality of the Nazi concentration camps that totally destroyed the will of the slave, creating an emasculated, docile Sambo who identified totally with the masters (98).

Moreover, slavery was often associated with exogamous groups, captives or members of other groups outside the community, but the post-renaissance development of an intense ideology of racism produced the peculiarly destructive modern form of commercial, chattel slavery in which all rights and all human values were set aside and from which only a few could ever hope to achieve full legal freedom. It has been suggested by some commentators that slavery gave birth to racism, at least in its modern form, just as racism became the excuse for slavery's excesses. (qtd. in Davidson 1994)

The Negro slave system that was employed and refined over the years' period was the extreme form known as commercial slavery in which slaves were not just made to labour in domestic capacities or forced into concubinage but provided the dominant work-force of entire economies. Commercial slavery was the logical extension both of the need to acquire a cheap labour force for burgeoning planter economies, and of the desire to construct Europe's cultures as civilized in contrast to the native, the cannibal, and the savage.

Given the extent to which it becomes apparent that the very nature of a slave mutiny both destabilizes and inverts a presumed natural order, erasing difference and revealing connection and doubling, it is not surprising that the African-American writers deal with the slave-mutiny, through the subtle use of paradox as the key rhetorical strategy. And more generally, it deals with the subject matter that this trope is broadly characteristic of slave-mutiny genre as a whole-- providing a useful approach for all such texts. The world of sailors who inhabited the oceans, crossing borders in modern machines that were themselves micro-system of linguistic and political hybridity was one of rigid hierarchy in which all were mutually complicit, the ranks defining each other and mutually dependent, and ruled by a captain of god-like status. (qtd in Gilroy,12)

Thus not only were the blacks sailors in a paradoxical situation with regard to the element they traversed, but there is also an element of paradox in the concept of their engaging in mutiny, given the inversion of mutually recognized natural hierarchy, based on class and capital. Thus it can be said that shipboard slave rebellions are inherently paradoxical. In a slave-- mutiny: not only is the superior/inferior, rulers/ruled binaries disrupted, but also the more fundamental human/nonhuman distinction. The trope of paradox that informs the narratives of

slave mutinies indeed contemporaneous nonfiction accounts of slave mutinies. Mutinies are inherently destabilizing, since they reveal the supposed fixed poles not to be what they seem-or rather where they seem. Mutineers and officers slave and free, are two sides of the slave coin-they are each other. When the master/ slave, ruler/ruled roles are inverted, each side reveals characteristics of the other, for better and worse until there is no discernible distinction.

Since the late 1960s, a crisis in representation in literary studies has altered literary historians' approach to literary criticism. To simplify, organic historicists granted literary texts a representative capacity by emphasizing their use of symbolic language, which established a complicated yet interconnected relationship between language and what it represented. Despite the breakdown of an organist model, the relation of parts to whole remains an important focus of study-- an alternative to synecdoche as a way of formulating that relation is what classical logician call subaltern opposition. Subaltern opposition more accurately describes situations contributing to the current crisis in representation, thus clarifying some of the confusions resulting from efforts to find alternatives to organic historicism. The relationship between parts and wholes can productively be described nor as synecdochical, but as subaltern. Subaltern can refer to someone of subordinate rank in the military. The term subaltern is also used today in literary and cultural studies to describe present or former subjects of colonialism. Both meaning can be applied to the hierarchical order, colonial subject acting as harpooners are placed in control of mates who, as in a military unit, occupy subordinate positions in relation to their captain.

Subaltern opposition involves the relation of a particular to a universal of which it is a part. A particular exists in a subaltern relation to a universal because the

truth of the universal governs its truth, whereas the particular truth does not govern the truth of the universal. The statement that some men are mortal beings; is subaltern to the statement all men are mortal beings because, if the latter is true, the former must be, whereas the truth of the former does not guarantee the truth of the latter. If in the democratic ideal of synecdoche parts can speak for the whole, by definition a subaltern cannot represent the whole of which it is a part.

The above mentioned theory is propagated by Thomas Brook who says that his point is not that all relations are subaltern ones. Further he says that his sense of possibilities allowed by subaltern opposition is deeply indebted to Derrida's description in the *Grammatology* of the logic of the supplement, which complicated the dialectic logic that governs relations of contradiction (98). Besides, Derrida says that the logic of the supplement implies that no part will ever fully represent discrepancy creates the conditions of or Subaltern Opposition and gives a text the potential--not necessarily activated-- to transform our sense of its culture. But with all this charming jollity and waggishness, the nigger has terrible capacities for revenge and hatred, and which outright to convince the skeptic that he is a man, not a baboon, and whether ever our southern partners quit us, and begin to take care of their niggers themselves, they will learn that they are no joke. Based on a principal of identity, contradiction assumes that a thing cannot at the same time and in the same be or not be. If one proposition is true, its contradiction proposition must be false. The logic of the supplement challenges dialectical logic by questioning the principal of identity on which contradiction is based. An entity is defined not only by what it is, but also by what it is not. If on the square of opposition the subaltern cannot by definition represent the whole of which it is a part, in Derrida's description of the supplement the subaltern substitutes for or takes the place of the whole that governs it. Although a

subaltern by definition cannot achieve the synecdochical ideal of representing the whole of which it is a part, the logic of the supplement implies the whole, nonetheless, depends upon a subaltern to represent it. Since the whole fails to achieve the promised self-contained self-sufficiency, it remains vulnerable to transformation by the subaltern efforts to represent it, even if those efforts are by necessity failures. Both the transformative potential and the failure are important in measuring the contribution that the subaltern can make to current debates about the relationship of literary debates about the relationship of literary texts to the cultures of which they are part. Derrida's logic of the supplement implies that no part will ever fully represent the whole. That representational discrepancy, as Brooks says, creates the condition for subaltern opposition and gives a text the potential-not transform our sense of its culture (qtd. in Brook 87).

Most texts are not, however, automatically transformative. Brooks reiterates my general description of subaltern opposition does not account for the complex interaction of concrete historical circumstances and concrete textual attributes that allows only some texts to be transformative. Precisely because no text, no matter who wrote it, can fully represent a culture, any text is potentially oppositional. Whether a text is or not requires a close reading of it in conjunction with the culture of which it is a part, however, that culture is defined (qtd. in Brook 89).

The sometimes tiresome debate over which texts truly represent a culture and which ones are in opposition to a culture's repressive forces is partly a response to the breakdown of organic historicism, according to which synecdochic symbolism gave certain great text the paradoxical power to be both representative and oppositional. If in historical actuality a group rules a culture through a particular discourse that speaks for some interests at the expense of others, a great text opposed that dominant

discourse [...] not because it was outside the culture or uncontaminated by particular discourse, but because in balancing them it transcended them. Symbolically unity served as a literary counterpart to a philosophical. One response to the breakdown of organic historicism has been to attack the existing cannot for representing white, male culture elite. Moreover, appropriate is subaltern opposition, which allows for the paradoxical possibility that something can be a part of a larger entity without being totally contained by it. The subaltern also proves useful in defining limits and suggesting possibilities regarding a human culture's relation to that larger entity we call nature, something against which many cultural critics define their work.

Barbara Johnson links relation in the presence of self-representation and self-sufficiency over corresponding categories defined by an absence. Using Derrida's discussion of the supplement to demonstrate that the identity of the privileged category is dependent upon, indeed inhabited by, the very category that it claims to oppose, Johnson questions the notion of a separate identity upon which the oppositional structure of dialectic depends (88).

Barthes calls bourgeoisie ideologies "the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, history into nature." Barthes himself cites Karl Marx in *The German Ideology* must pay attention to history, since ideology boils down to either an erroneous conception of history, or to a complete abstraction from it." While linking deconstruction to this tradition supplement it by challenging the dialectical logic on which it is based (89).

Althusser argues that ideology has no history can (though not necessarily) have an effect similar (though not identical) to the argument made by proslavery southerners prior to the civil war (96).

Similarly, in the context of cold war polemics, Althusser's argument served to undercut claim in the west about the freedom of civilization under democratic rule. Proslavery arguments suggest the potential danger of not distinguishing among the individual histories of particular ideologies and the limitations and possibilities of subjects under particular system (97).

With the demise of institutionalized slavery, it might seem unnecessary to make a distinction between subalterns and slaves. Nonetheless, confusion between them persists, even in the work of Homi K. Bhabha, one of the best critics in subaltern studies. Drawing on Derrida's use of subaltern to describe the possibilities of subaltern agency, Bhabha confuses the subaltern with the slave when he speaks of the diametrically opposed world views of master and slave, which between them account for the major historical and philosophical dialectic of modern times (102). The confusion results in part because Bhabha is using subaltern to describe colonial and postcolonial subjects, not as a category from classical logic. Unaware of the category of subaltern opposition, he attempts that disruption-as does Johnson --by staying solely within the language of contradiction. Regarding subaltern subjects there are, however, numerous times when the language of contradiction is appropriate, it cannot appropriately describe the possibilities for both opposition and domination. Further Thomas Brook says-- the crisis in representation experienced in current literary studies in the west is related to the discrepancy between the promises of full political representation and the continued existence of structures of hierarchical domination. That discrepancy suggests that the promise of full political representation might be the most subtle form of ideological control. As Bercovitch argues--the ideology of America holds out the promise of complete democracy, because its realization is perpetually deferred, serves to provoke rites of assent that channel the citizens'

allegiance and energies towards democratic fulfillment. But even he insists that such an ideology is not simply a strategy of containment, since it also creates conditions for perpetual transformation (99).

Thus we have the following paradox. Within the U.S. democratic system, political subjects exist in conditions of subalternity, a condition that makes it impossible for any part fully to represent the whole. Nonetheless, the promise that each part can synecdochically speak for the whole is not simply a form of ideologically control, because it also creates the conditions by which subaltern opposition has the potential to transform the whole. In other words, the discrepancy between the synecdochical promise of full representation and the actuality of subaltern conditions, which marks the whole as a force of oppression, also opens up transformative possibilities by working against what Kessler Harris calls “a stable meaning or precise unchanging definition of America.” Not a self-contained, unchanging entity, the whole governing the parts relates to them in the way that Derrida describes the subaltern stance of the supplement (100). Never fully represented by its subaltern parts, yet relying on them for representation, the political body is potentially transformed by acts of subaltern opposition, in which previously unrepresented parts put themselves forward as representative.

Even if subaltern opposition within representative democracies sounds preferable to systems in which an existing whole speak through its parts or particular part--say a specific political party-- is the only one allowed to speak for the whole, uncritical celebration is not warranted. First, subaltern opposition says nothing about how a system treats those who are not considered part of a body politic, as we have seen, representative democracies can create possibilities for their own subjects and be



a terribly repressive force to people not subject to their rule or even to those within their jurisdiction but denied citizenship, such as slaves or aliens.

Furthermore, they can be a force of repression when they deny full citizenship and political rights to various subjects, whether women or people under different forms of colonial rule. In its logical use subaltern even helps to articulate the difference between the possible political agencies of those with full rights in a representative democracy and the subaltern studies, for paradoxically enough, the latter's possibilities of transformative, subaltern opposition are dramatically limited, if not necessarily completely denied. The success of his campaign of nonviolent resistance depended partly on British recognition of the rights of its colonial subjects. The very notion of the subaltern reminds us that any such opposition assumes the prior existence of a set of governing limitations. Indeed, to call subjects within the democracies subaltern highlights the discrepancy between the promise of full representation and the actual condition of subordination.

Arguing for the inadequacy of ideological analysis in American Studies, Fisher disputes a major premise of ideological criticism resulting from Althusser's claim that a social formation maintains itself by reproducing the conditions of production. Further, Fisher rejects such formulations for society whose commitment to self-destruction in the name of its own next possibility is far more important than its interest in the transfer of the forms of the past to a future generation (102). Not one of those cultures of preservation, inheritance, and self-reproduction that we tend to take anthropologically as the human norm (102). America undergoes permanent transformation, made possibility because; American culture operates rhetorically, not ideologically. Constructing a problematic opposition, Fisher asserts that ideology depends upon a monopoly on representation of the sort found in a monarchy, whereas

rhetorics grow out of a situation of civil wars. American culture, characterized by “incomplete dominance of representation,” becomes a culture of permanent openness and change (102). A civil war of representation between individual parts is converted into conflicts within an open-ended whole (102).

Further, Brook says that subaltern opposition can challenge the containment thesis by offering transformative possibilities. After all, Fisher’s argument illustrates how perpetual transformation can become the ultimate condition of containment. The conditions for transform are not all the same.

Fisher’s highly politicized claim to stand outside the political does not recognize that politics in dialectically opposition. Subaltern opposition holds out possibilities for transformation but, as I have argued, also draws attention to persistent conditions of subordination. Moreover, Brook says subaltern opposition also allows members within a society capable of perpetual transformations to contemplate the effects of those transformations on various wholes of which their society is a part, such as the community of nations or nature (105).

To recall, subaltern opposition has a transformative possibility in a democratic political system only when it offers the synecdochical promise of full representation. However, mainting that promise leads to a crisis in representation. In so far as a text exists in a subaltern, rather than a synecdochical relation, to the culture that produced in, it is not a self-contained, self-sufficient work. Still governing the responses of reader, such a text requires their labour to bring it into representation, which involves the production of points of view in the present. If literary critics are mistaken when they allow their reading to represent an entire culture, subaltern reading can continue to play a valuable role supplementing efforts at cultural criticism (106).

Subaltern, meaning of inferior rank is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power. Since the history of the ruling classes is realized in the state history being the history of states and dominant groups, Gramsci was interested in the historiography of the history. He outlined some points plan for studying the history of the subaltern classes which included: the transformations that the subaltern groups produce to press their claims; new formations within the old frame work that assert the autonomy of the subaltern classes.

Gramsci claimed that the history of the subaltern classes was just as complex as the history of the dominant classes although the history of the latter is usually that which is accepted as official history. For him, the history of subaltern social group is necessarily fragmented and episodic, since they are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel.

The term has been adapted to post-colonial studies from the work of the subaltern studies group of historians, who aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies. It is used in subaltern studies as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way. The group formed by Ranjit Guha, and initially including Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman and Gyan Pandey-- has produced five volumes of subaltern studies: essays relating to the history, politics, economics and sociology of subalterneity as well as the attitudes, ideologies and belief systems-in short, the culture informing that condition.

Recognizing that the subaltern cannot be under-with dominance, the group aimed to examine the subaltern as an objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role. The goals of the group seemed from the belief that the historiography of Indian nationalism, for instance, had long been dominated by elitism-colonialism-colonialist elitism and bourgeoisie-nationalist elitism-- both the consequences of British colonialism. One clear demonstration of the difference between the elite and the subaltern lies in the nature of political mobilization: elite mobilization was achieved vertically through adaptation of British parliamentary institutions, while the subaltern relied on the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or class associations. Popular mobilization in the colonial period took the form of peasant uprisings and the contention is that this remains a primary locus of political action, despite the change in political structure.

Despite the great diversity of subaltern groups, the one invariant feature was a notion of resistance to elite domination. Clearly the concept of subaltern is meant to cut across several kinds of political and cultural binaries, such as colonialism versus nationalism, expression, in favour of more general distinction between subaltern and elite because, suggests Guha, this subaltern group is invariably over looked in studies of political and cultural change. Moreover, the people or the subaltern is a group defined by its difference from the elite. The notion of the subaltern became an issue in post-colonial theory when Gayatri Spivak critiqued the assumptions of the subaltern studies group in the essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

Spivak goes on to elaborate the problems of the category of the subaltern by looking at the situation of gendered subjects and of Indian women in particular , for both as an object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. Through an analysis of a

particular case, Spivak concludes with the declaration that the subaltern cannot speak. This has sometimes been interpreted to mean that there is no way in which oppressed or politically marginalized groups can voice their resistance, or that the subaltern only has a dominant language or a dominant voice in which to be heard. Her point is that no act of dissent or resistance occurs on behalf of an essential subaltern subject entirely separate from the dominant discourse that provides the language and the conceptual categories with which the subaltern voice speaks. Clearly, the existence of post-colonial discourse itself is an example of such speaking, and in most cases the dominant language or mode of representation is appropriated so that the marginal voice can be heard.

### III. Babo's Resistance

Gayatri Spivak critiques the assumption of the subaltern studies group in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where she elaborates the problem of the category of the subaltern by looking at the situations of general subjects and of Indian women in particular, for 'both as an object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. Through an analysis of particular, Spivak concludes with the declaration that the subaltern cannot speak (97). This has sometimes been interpreted to mean that there is no way in which oppressed or politically marginalized groups can voice their resistance. To strengthen this view, Frederick Douglass's view can be taken into account. He says:

But how it is with the American slave...he is said to be happy; happy man can speak. But ask the slave what is his condition-- what his state of mind-- what he thinks of enslavement? And you had as well addressed your inquiries to the silent dead. There comes no voice from the enslaved. We are left to gather his feelings by imagining what ours would be, were our souls in his souls. But with all this charming jollity and waggishness, the nigger has terrible capacities for revenge and hatred, and which ought to convince the skeptic that he is a man, not a baboon; and whenever our southern partners quit us, and begin to take care of their niggers themselves, they will learn that they are no joke.  
(qtd in Putnam's Monthly 55)

With this consideration in mind, I propose to trace the bare trajectory of Melville's novel entitled *Benito Cereno* in the following way, as abstracted both from the third-person account of Delano's perception and from the deposition.

Delano the captain of an American sealer, the *Bachelor's Delight*, sights the *San Dominick* in evident distress off the coast of Chile. He boards the ship in order to supervise its relief and, remarkably, spends most of the day on ship without realizing that a violent slave revolt has taken place-- that the captain of the slave transport, Benito Cereno, and his surviving crew are under the control of the slaves, and that the slaves, Alexandro Aranda, has been gruesomely murdered. Given the deposition of the novella:

That the negroes Babo and Atufal held daily conferences, in which they discussed what was necessarily for their design of returning to Senegal, whether they were to kill all the Spaniards, and particularly the deponent; [...] next day, the negro Babo came to the place where the deponent was, and told him that he was determined to kill his master, Don Alexandra Aranda, because he and his companions could not otherwise be sure of their liberty. (253)

As part of a skillfully managed conspiracy among the slaves, Babo maintains control from behind his pose as personal servant and humble slave of Cereno, while Cereno is made to perform the role of the capricious master. Nevertheless, the success of Babo's well-contrived plan--which readers learn as they gradually move away from an anxious involvement with Captain Delano's perplexity-- depends upon Delano's profoundly culpable gullibility, for he cannot or will not penetrate the masquerade. He is described, in a famous observation, as a "person of singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man" (Karcher 446).

Complicating this ingenuous benevolence is his unshakable racism. Perhaps the most powerfully persistent but almost certainly mistaken view of Babo's role in the story is that he is an entirely positive image of a revolutionary conspirator who heroically instigates and leads a ruthlessly violent but just rebellion. The conclusion that can be drawn from this judgment is that Melville is a strong abolitionist posture, and endorses slave insurrection (446).

Furthermore, he satirically verifies the racist complacencies of American whites, of whom Delano, a New Englander, is representative, along with the judicial process that brutally supports civil order as an absolute value.

Nevertheless, while affirming the tale's satirical and antislavery thrust, an equally persistent tradition of resistance to this view of Babo has expressed concern over the profoundly violent character of Babo's conduct of the rebellion and, more particularly, his disturbing relationship with Benito Cereno. Commenting upon the characterization of Babo, Karcher says:

If Babo is "on the whole a favourable portrayal of a black rebel, despite the fearsomeness with which he is tinged in his role as white America's nemesis," [...] even to the point of contradiction, that "moving as [...] one can honestly deduce from it an unequivocal endorsement of a revolutionary violence as a means of ending slavery. (445)

Karcher's abrupt objection acknowledges that Melville has raised the historical problem of the incommensurability of revolutionary means and ends, a problem at the heart of the antebellum debate over slavery and at the heart of the story.

The view put forward by Karcher is apt to shed light on what Melville wants by reducing both the white's altitude to slavery and the blacks' violent means of



resisting it. And that is what happens at the end of the novel. The kingpin of ship mutiny, Babo, is sentenced to death. Similarly, George Dekker by placing due emphasis on the relationship between Babo and Cereno, brings the reader closer to Babo's moral significance when he observes that "Cereno has a glimpse, if not of pure evil, then at least an atavism so sinister, intelligent and profound, as to shatter forever his sense of what it is to be human" (449).

Although there is a widely shared sense of something about Babo, the precise character of the moral phenomenon he represents has, in a significant way, eluded the commentators who appear to be the most disturbed by it. The truth is that Cereno is deeply involved with Babo. His will to live is destroyed because the different certainties of his world as a Spanish gentleman have been pulled down and caricatured with ferocious irony. It is because Cereno has been enslaved by Babo, a pattern that a slave's revenge might be expected to take, a psychological and historical plausibility which is fundamental to the appalling intensities of the story. Charles Whipple argues, "No human being is fit to be trusted with absolute; irresponsible power. If the best portion of our community were selected to hold and use such authority [as masters possessed] they would very soon be corrupted" (450). William Bartley says:

Melville universalizes this claim and deepens its implications in ways inconceivable to the benevolent and condescending racism of the abolitionist movements far from anticipating a postmodern, hypersensitive skepticism concerning the other; we must gather his feelings by imagining what ours would be. (456)

If we are never privy to Babo's thoughts-- if Babo offers no revelatory soliloquies, like those of Iago or Milton's Satan, we have in Babo the more telling evidence of a

consciousness that privileges the efficacy of deeds over words, and whose deeds are eloquent in themselves, in the historically conventional extension of eloquent to action. The motive behind Babo's pointed refusal is captured, all the while that his "aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (458). Melville by the process of projecting such a frightening revenge yields a discovery that proves the most persuasive means for destroying the prepossessions of the personal and institutional points of view. Further Bartley says, "This discovery-- as dangerous to affirm as to deny-- emerges from Melville's scenario in which the humanity denied the African by a racist mythology is redeemed by Babo's capacity for a tyranny of an exceptional kind, over body and soul" (451).

Melville discovers on his own the full, dramatically conceivable implications of his conception of Babo. Because Babo victimizes Cereno with an exercise of might in more developed sense. Moreover, Babo does so with an appalling virtuosity, attesting to his capacity for ruthless force, combined with a subtle intelligence and a highly competent malice. Babo's exercise of might, as one can see, depends upon his ability to exploit the forms and procedures of overthrowing oppression (452). As we learn from the deposition: that Yan was the man who by Babo's command and, willingly prepared the skeleton of Don Alexandro; and later on riveted the skeleton to the bow... that the Negro Babo was a plotter from first to last; he ordered every murder, and was the helm and keel of the revolt (261).

Babo's tyranny is founded on his wielding of might in the elementary and coarse sense, that particular power which, in Well's words, "makes a thing of anybody who comes under its sway" and "when exercised to the full....makes a thing of man in the most literal sense", one can see Babo wielding might in its most spectacular form in his staging of the public execution of Alexandro Aranda (453). At

best, this is a prudential display of violence meant to guarantee the slaves their freedom, serving that end, as Michael Foucault observes, as a policy of terror (456).

Thus, Babo, like the authority he overthrows, and in precise conformity with the forensic means he appropriates, proves a competent practitioner of might. Nevertheless, Babo's ambition reaches far beyond the aims that could be fulfilled by a prudential if ruthless violence, and for which he might still be defended, for this vengeful slave is a completely ruthless toward the soul as he is toward the body-- a fact already crudely apparent in the terror that attends the exercise of might. Frederick Douglass says: the slave is like the silent dead. There comes no voice from the enslaved. And further if there were no other fact descriptive of slavery, than that the slave is dumb, this alone would be sufficient to mark the slave system as a grand aggregation of human horrors (459).

And so, if one try to construct the actions of Babo that haunt the margins of Delano's perceptions, he senses that Babo silences Benito Cereno by making him a thing even as he spares his life. Babo achieves this by forcing Cereno, for the purpose of keeping the conspiracy intact, to act the role of capricious master for Delano. Another feature of masquerade is that Cereno must make a show of subduing Atufal, the former king, kept in chains for an unspecified offense appropriately a matter of indifference to the putatively capricious Cereno. Every two hours Atufal is brought before his imperious master to seek his pardon, but Atufal in keeping with his royal spirit as Delano construes it, defiantly refuses to speak. How muteness does work in slave revolt is apparently clear in the text where we find:

The Spaniard, regarded in his reserve, seemed the involuntary victim of mental disorder. But, in fact, his reserve might in some degree, have proceeded from design imposed on him by Benito. If so, then here was

evinced the unhealthy climax of that icy though conscientious policy, more or less adopted by all commanders of large ships, which except in signal emergencies, obliterates alike the manifestation of sway with every trace of sociality; transforming the man into a bloc, or rather into a loaded cannon, which, until there is call for thunder, has nothing to say. (127)

These familiar details emphasize how the silenced Cereno is trapped behind a public surface which, lineament by lineament, is disjoined from his private self. One can take as grotesque understatement at the end of the story-- how hard it had been to enact the part forced on the Spaniard by Babo. Cereno's fellow feeling guarantees his silence, just as it aggravates his suffering, and is even used toward achieving that end. Bartley says:

The characterization of Babo becomes more plausible in the scene where the very delicacy of his might quietly emerges and is all the more appalling for being so. In quick response to Cereno lapse, moving to reimpose close, threatening surveillance on him Babo says that it is time for his master's shave. Delano finds nothing unusual in this, another apparent sign of Cereno's caprice. The action of the scene begins with assault on Delano's imperceptions when, for a moment, Babo brandishes the razor threateningly near Cereno's throat. Delano-- nothing Babo's easy cheerfulness and smooth tact and recalling his own conviction that most negroes are natural valets and hairdresser-- is sufficiently reassured of Babo's docility as he observes his preparations to shave his master. Thus he misses the ironies of Babo's subsequent political theatrics. Babo, of course, is in perfect command

of the situation, attuning his manner to Delano's racist expectations.

(460)

Few besides Melville had the imaginative courage to countenance another kind of impasse latent in antebellum America-- an America that is, in the shadow of the Fugitive Slave haunted by the historical precedents of insurrection.

While discussing *Benito Cereno* in *To Wake the Nations*, Erick J. Sandquist places Melville's tale convincingly within the context of the debate over slavery and the fear of slave rebellion in the American 1850s. Moreover, he says:

The governing figure of Melville's ...his historical vision is a type of tautology that, through its power to assert "the virtual equivalence of potentially different authorities or meaning" effectively collapses proslavery and antislavery arguments, thereby replicating the paralysis, paranoia and political stagecraft by which slavery was maintained in the immediate antebellum years. (39)

Sandquist's reading of Melville's tale posits a unified African "language of assistance" as the vehicle of revolt on the ship. According to Sandquist, *Benito Cereno* depicts a community of African slaves enacting its rebellion through an exclusive mode of cultural expression beyond the perception of the colonial power (40).

The linguistic situation on the *San Dominic* is defined-- as with most aspects of the tale-- by equivocation: a peculiar technique whereby apparent opposites are equally voice. Thus alongside the employment of African language in the tale, there is equal evidence for the African manipulation of a European language: a manipulation that has even more terrifying implications for the whites on board the ship. Of course it would be difficult to argue that African languages are not in use on the *San Dominick*. At one point the narrator describes the use of some African word,

equivalent to pshaw, and it is beyond doubt that the “ Monotonous chant”, the “queer cry”, and the “unknown syllable “of oakum-pickers all correspond to a misheard African language (44). It would be equally difficult to argue that the Ashanti hatchet-polishers do not have at least some role in maintaining the mechanism of rebellion on the ship, a fact that becomes obvious toward the end of the tale for violent rebellion.

Instead of implying racial sameness, Melville clearly demarcates ethnic boundaries, dividing the slaves into several groups: Negroes who have lived for a number of years among the Spanish; a general group born in Africa. Rather than picturing the slaves operating outside the dominant colonial discourse, Melville makes the more subversive implication that they are operating within it: that the Africans have the power to assume the Spanish tongue and use it to impose an intense linguistic surveillance upon the Spanish crew. Hence, it becomes clear that, throughout the tale, the Spanish tongue has been a weapon turned against the whites.

The linguistic logic of the tale critiques the demeaning discourse of primitivism imposed by the Europe upon the African: the tendency to view blackness as a sign of stupidity and to create what Fredrick Douglass calls:

The voiceless condition of the enslaved prefiguring the silence and muteness that follow Cereno’s confession that the Negro has casted a shadow upon him, are a series of moments in which the muteness and silence of the Spanish captain are matched by his correspondingly dark and dusky appearance. (qtd in Karcher 141)

When Cereno is confronted by the dark muteness of the chained Atufal, “a bootless rage, his white lips glued together.” At the same time as *Benito Cereno* reverses the notion that Babo is a shadowy presence of silence by revealing how the African’s brain -- “that hives of subtlety”-- spearheads an active linguistic presence

that engineers the overthrow of a colonial power. Melville's tale also silences Benito Cereno's dominant white discourse, and casts the whiteness of the Spaniard into shadowy darkness.

The linguistic logic of the tale is equivocal: it tends to equate racial groups, thereby confusing the racist hierarchy upon which Delano's ideology depends.

Concerning the actual slave revolt upon which *Benito Cereno* is based Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey speculate that "the Spanish ignorance of African linguistic and cultural practices was supplemented by "the Africans" mastery of certain elements of Spanish civilization ... which would account in part for Benito Cereno's appearing "frightened at his own shadow" (48).

The linguistic assumptions of polygenist, scientific racism are undermined by Melville's narrative of cultural relativism, which suggests that the Africans are not trapped by their discourse, but are able to assume freely the language of their controllers and use it to impose silence upon them. Delano is not trapped outside a secret world of cultural expression, but is blinded by an African community capable of manipulating various level of communication, and capable of a competence in the Spanish tongue that flatly contradict the type of European linguistic absolutism that attempted to create hierarchies of language to justify its colonial and cultural aims.

When Delano boards the San Dominick, he is confronted by a clamorous throng of whites and blacks pouring out, as in one language, a common tale of suffering. They exclaim in Spanish--which helps conceal the deeper reality -- that the scurvy, together with the fever, had swept off a greater part of their number, more especially the Spaniards, that the San Dominick had laid trance without wind, the breeze having suddenly deserted her, in unknown waters, to sultry calms. Indeed, Don Benito, at Babo's command, informs the stranger that the San Dominick had lost

whole families of the Africans, and yet a larger number, proportionately of the Spaniards, including, by a luckless fatality, every remaining officer on board. Thus in an unexpected leap of the imagination, Melville has Babo put previously recounted by Melville. Melville's satire of the slavery debate does not clearly imply his own stance, nor can one limit his social concerns solely to the subject of slavery.

Delano is speaking with Don Benito and desperately seeking some closure, trying to convince his moribund friend that the past is passed... forger it. You are saved, Delano insists; what has casted such a shadow upon you? The Negro, Cereno famously answers, and there was no more confession that day (116). One paragraph later, there is silence. This silence speaks volumes, though what one hears can range from despair to racist erasure to more sensitive thoughts on the politics of silence and open-ended narration. It points to the state of political discourse, for one can see the San Dominick as a society dominated by a problem it will not or cannot bring itself to name-- as an allegory of antebellum America where debate over slavery was often preempted, suppressed, and misunderstood.

Frederick Douglass charged in 1853 that a cardinal object of the slavery party was the suppression of all anti-slavery discussion, and abolitionists often traced their movement in terms of the struggle for speech (498). At the same time, abolitionist and slaves are not the only parties suppressed, nor can one blame only anti-abolitionists for the silenced aboard the San Dominick. Besides, Melville in *Benito Cereno* predicts that language will not solve sectional conflict, that whether mistranslated, ignored, or suppressed, words will eventually end in deeds, the dark prophecy of Babo's demise. He also notes the plight of blacks when Babo illustrates Douglass's charge that white Americans shut the blacks' mouths (506). Maurice Lee says: *Benito Cereno* anticipates a revisionist version of the war, one that blames not the ethics or



economics of slavery but the inability of two alien cultures to talk over differences peaceably.

Melville does challenge race relationship by inverting colour supremacy, but class consciousness remains largely inchoate, even if Melville bemoans the ambivalence of antislavery and labour reform. More troubling than the failure of sailors and slaves to find common ground, ground does not exist, either between or within class and racial categories. Benito Cereno's view of the fore-castle is originally cynical, for the voice of the people is not simply suppressed the other people, and when impatient readers expect from their fictions more commanding and dramatic performances even as they, like captain Delano, consider themselves republican. Babo's end may point to the fact that African American were not free to speak. Eric Sandquist argues that the threat of revolt survives beyond Babo's demise. Others find that the tale resists readerly racism by exposing the Delano in all of us.

Herman Melville makes a strong racial statement in their nautical work entitled *Benito Cereno*. This novel antedates the abolition of the slave trade. For most whites, both American and European, blacks were a class apart, viewed as little more than cattle or other agricultural property. Melville presents in *Benito Cereno* blacks who are superior to most of their white neighbours in intelligence, cunning, patience and fortitude. These black characters- the eponymous Melville's fiction- are slaves who make effectual use of whites' tendency to underestimate their abilities in order to take diabolical advantage of situations for vengeful purposes. By presenting loyal and subservient exteriors to gullible Caucasians, Babo craftily executes murderous revenge on those who enslave them (245).

Given the deposition one can see how the black slaves on San Dominick go on killing all the Spaniards or the whites:

Nearly a score of the white were killed. Exclusive of those by the balls, many were mangled; their wounds- mostly inflicted by the long-edged sealing spears. On the other side, none were killed, though several were wounded; some severely, including the mate (242).

Melville's American captain, Amasa Delano, reflects the then- current view of most whites regarding slaves as lesser entities. The demarcation between Black and white is so great that Delano cannot even conceive of an equal association between the races. John D. Cloy says: "The vastly higher intelligence and cunning of the black characters [...] make a powerful and radical statement about Melville's belief in the supposed superiority of the white race. Further, he reiterates that the individual depth of the blacks' revenge on their white owners is an accurate measure of their hatred (247)." Besides, he argues that author stresses the slaves' pagan religion and foreign outlandish practices. Not only has that he even said that the loosely interpreted European Christianity that allowed for the enslavement of the fellow beings is contrasted with the more primal beliefs of the Americans. For the blacks, vengeance is an accepted part of their culture. The more barbarous and atrocities including cannibalism committed against enemies, the more successful the balancing of cosmic accounts. Thus Babo and his compatriots brutally slay the Spaniards aboard the San Dominick--by drowning, bludgeoning, and hacking them to death. Melville subtly points out the slight distance between the ownership and degradation of slavery perpetrated by the whites to the wanton butchery of their enemies by the blacks. The intention of the Africans in Melville's tale is as much concerned with control of their destinies [...] as it is with revenge. Babo is willing to sacrifice his own life by leaping into Delano's boat in pursuit of Cereno; he goes to any lengths to rain his hold on the Spaniard-- Babo dies on the scaffold for his crimes, unrepentant and silent to the last.

However, his control over his victim extends beyond his death. Melville employs the black characters as justified revenge figures, although not totally positive characters. Their enslavement by whites permits the extremity of the slaves' action: through the barbarity of their retaliation/ revolts. The writer sought to demonstrate a more "civilized" barbarity on the part of whites in the practice of chattel bondage. Walter Benjamin says: "There is no documentation of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256).

Throughout the first segment of the novel, one gets mystified about what is taking place aboard the Spanish cargo ship *San Dominick* as the American Captain Amasa Delano, whose dominant perspective readers are forced to follow. It is only later, in the legal deposition that constitutes the second segment of the narrative, where we finally come to know about the true history of *San Dominick's* voyage. Here it becomes clear in detail about the hidden facts of the slave rebellion and the elaborate masquerade of normalcy that was taking place before Delano's eyes. The deposition, in recounting such details, thus would appear to resolve all of the mysteries to which one so far witnesses. As the narrator comments at the beginning of the brief epilogue to the tale, "If the depositions have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the *San Dominick's* hull lies open-today" (114).

If the complications mentioned above are supposed to refer to the previously concealed facts of the events--that is, to what actually took place aboard the *San Dominick* during Delano's visit there--there can be little doubt that they are meant to refer to the exact moral implications of those events.

While commenting on *Benito Cereno*, Dennis Pahl quotes F.O. Matthiessen, who is of the view that Melville is morally irresponsible in depicting the *San Dominick*'s blacks as evil and savagely vindictive:

Matthiessen charged Melville with “a failure to reckon with the fact” that “the Negroes were slaves and that evil had originally been done to them.” [...] Melvillean radical politics, emphasize rather the text's deeply ironic stance toward captain Delano who, along with Cereno, becomes the embodiment of white oppression... it is the white controlled institution of slavery and not to the black mutineer—that becomes the real emblem of evil and barbarism within Melville's tale.

(172)

Spivak argues: “no perspective critical of imperialism can turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self” (253).

Delano tries at every step to domesticate the *San Dominick*, even more so does he try to assimilate the strangers of *Benito Cereno*. Delano thinks: it is at first the natural hardships endured at sea that make Cereno seem half-lunatic. After vacillating in his opinions, Delano tries to reduce the problem of deciphering Cereno to a simple moral opposition: either Cereno represents innocent lunacy, or wicked imposture. But her reasoning becomes another way for Delano to domesticate the whole question of Cereno. No doubt for one who is inclined to see the world in black and white terms--in terms of good and evil--such a possibility would be too unnatural even to contemplate. All this naturalization, or domestication, of the world around him serves Delano well as a way to construct a self that would have complete domination over

those entire he considers Others. While commenting on the presentation of blacks in *Benito Cereno*, Dennis Pahl says, “The blacks are anything but a faceless, homogenous group; they are themselves broken down into their own orders of master and slaves, with Babo at the helm administering [...] the violence perpetrated against the Spanish crew” (179).

After the closer reading of the novel, it becomes apparently and vividly clear that right since the beginning till the end of the novel all the happenings relating to the slave mutiny are master-minded by none other than Babo who is the ring leader as well as key operator of the violent means of mutiny. Declaration of the first witness in the deposition proves the statement made above:

I, Don Jose De Abos and Padilla, His Majesty’s Notary for the Royal Revenue, and Register of this province, and Notary public of the Holy Crusade of this Bishporic, do certify and declare that in the criminal cause commenced ... that the negroes revolted suddenly, wounded dangerously the boatswain and the carpenter, and successively killed eighteen men of those who were sleeping upon deck, some with handspikes and hatchets and others by throwing them alive overboard, after tying them;...although in the act of revolt the negroes made themselves masters of the hatchway, where the negro Babo was being the ringleader. (249)

Unlike Delano who believes in the naturalness of signs, Babo is only to aware of the artifice of language and of how power really lies with those who control the social signs and who have the ability to make these signs appear absolutely natural. Really speaking after the closer study of the text it becomes apparently clear that Melville’s presentation of Babo, one way or the other, must be sympathetically viewed as an

oppressed slave attempting to overturn what his white oppressors see as a natural social hierarchy. Besides, it cannot be ignored that Melville defends Babo largely on the basis of his link to certain valiant slave rebellions in the antebellum America around the time of Melville's writing. Hence, it can be said that, Melville, no doubt understands and sympathizes with the plight of the blacks under slavery; it would be a mistake simply to reduce the blacks depicted in the history to a collective body of individuals unmarked by important differences among themselves. Melville's dissatisfaction with both the sides-- whites' attitude to slavery and blacks' violent means of resistance to overthrow slavery--

Comes to the fore when we see the following lines:

And as God lives, Don Amasa, I know not whether desire for my own safety alone could have nerved me to that leap into your boat, had it not been for the thought that, did you, unenlightened, return to your ship, you my best friend, with all who might be with you, stolen upon, that night, in your hammocks, would never in this world have wakened again. Do but think how you walked this deck how you sat in this cabin, every inch of ground mined into honey-combs under you. Had I dropped the least hint, made the least advance towards an understanding between us, death, explosive death-- yours as mine-- would have ended the scene. True, true, cried Captain Delano, starting, "you have saved my life, Don Benito, more than I yours, saved it, too, against my knowledge and will." "Nay, my friend," rejoined the Spaniard, courteous even to the point of religion, God charmed your life, but you saved mine. (266)

By ending the novel with the hopeful note of deep understanding between the black Captain and the white one, he pleads for abolishing the practice of slavery from the face of every society which is deeply rooted in the womb of society in different form.

Thus, Melville very tacitly means to convey in the novel that he is neither sided with the whites' attitude to slavery, for he attacks upon the American captain Delano, who symbolizes white in general, and his evil design of recapturing the *San Dominick* in the name of providing the black humanitarian aid during food and water crisis, nor does he prefer to using force or violent means of resistance while overthrowing slavery. Above all, he means to convey that it causes devastation and the massive loss of life and property to both the sides: master and slave. It happens at the end of the novel where scores of blacks and whites are killed in a very short span of time.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Melville tilts at slavery system prevalent and widespread in American, Caribbean as well as in elsewhere society. His tilt at the abolitionist movement undercuts and undermines blacks' violent means of resisting or using any sort of volatile force while overthrowing slavery. Besides, at the same time, he reduces white's attitude towards slavery. He is of the view that slavery which is an evil thing can be uprooted from the face of the society not by adopting violent means rather by letting them exercise their inalienable right equally as the whites do. Not only that, he even conveys that the marginalized and downtrodden people cannot speak as Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha say; but it does not mean that they will remain passive without doing anything against their oppressor. Moreover, he says that every group be it slave or master, wants to have their say in each and every activity of human life.

Melville presents Babo as an oppressed slave attempting to overturn what his white oppressors see as a natural social hierarchy. Being an abolitionist Melville defends Babo largely on the basis of his link to certain valiant slave rebellions in the antebellum America. On the other hand, Melville presents Captain Delano as a benevolent who condescends racism of the abolitionist movement. Ultimately, Babo is hanged to death. By this Melville means to convey that the consequence caused by grave and gruesome crime can never be productive rather it can be devastative. In addition to that, when Delano commands-- San Dominick be sail towards Lima, instantly, there flares up fighting between the blacks and the whites. As a result, numbers of Negroes are massacred, some are thrown off alive from the ship, and others are hacked brutally like cattle.



Thus, one can see Melville is sided with Babo, who represents slave in general. At the same time, he attacks upon any sort of use of violent means while overthrowing slavery. Besides, he tilts at whites' way of treating Blacks.

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