

“THE LURKING GHOST OF SLAVERY IN LYDIA MARIA CHILD’S SHORT STORY ENTITLED “THE QUADROONS”

Ratna Asmarani

English Department - Faculty of Humanities

Diponegoro University

Semarang, Indonesia

ratna_asmarani@yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how slavery, like a lurking ghost in the antebellum Georgia, is inescapable in the peaceful life of the female quadroons who have lived in a secluded place. Since the focus of analysis is on the female quadroons, the frame of analysis used is the feminist literary criticism. Considering that the author is a female, a gynocritic analysis is also used to discover the author’s purpose. Contextual method of literary analysis is also applied, combining intrinsic elements with extrinsic ones. Thus the concepts of one-drop rule and miscegenation, the characteristics of quadroon, and the antebellum Georgia are intertwined with the life of the female quadroons. The result shows that slavery always finds a way to destroy the life of the female quadroons only because they are considered as slaves in the antebellum South due to the application of one-drop rule.

Keywords: Slavery, Quadroon, One-Drop Rule

INTRODUCTION

The complicated problems around the offspring of mixed marriage in antebellum South always arouse serious concern especially if those problems are around the female offspring. Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880), the author, is “among the most influential of nineteenth-century American women writers ... a tireless crusader for truth and justice and a champion of excluded groups in American society—especially Indians, slaves, and women” (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/lydia-maria-child> accessed April 23, 2017). Her short story, “The Quadroons”, tells about the heart-breaking ending of two mixed-race female offspring, mother and daughter, in the

antebellum Georgia due to the haunting shadow of slavery. The problem discussed in this paper is how the long cruel hands of slavery are unwilling to let the mixed-race female offspring live in peaceful and happy atmosphere full of love and respect.

METHODOLOGY

In the antebellum South, the slavery system demands that the relation of white and black must be restricted and fully hierarchical in which interracial marriage is strictly forbidden and unlawful. The pejorative term ‘miscegenation’ is used to call the white-black marriage. This term “was coined in 1863” since “The growing presence of African slaves, however, generated significant legal questions about status,

family, and heredity” leading to “anti-miscegenation laws during colonial time” (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/sociology-general-terms-and-concepts-8> accessed April 23, 2017).

One of the debasing rules applied to Blacks is ‘the One-Drop rule’ in which “a single drop of "black blood" makes a person a black” (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html> accessed June 28, 2015). The consequence of this rule is “Offspring of whites and blacks ended up being categorized based on the status of the mother. All children of female slaves inherited the status of slavery, no matter what the status of the father” (<http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/onedrop.html> accessed April 23, 2017).

In the nineteenth century, there are many offensive terms to call the unlawful offspring of the miscegenation, such as mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, etcetera. A quadroon is “a person who was one-quarter black and three-quarters white ... a *quadroon* had one grandparent of African descent” (<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/quadroon> accessed April 23, 2017). The uniqueness of a quadroon is described as follows:

Yet there is nothing simple about the American Quadroon. Once she was the picture of irresistible beauty, the symbol of a city thought of as irredeemably “other”, an earthbound goddess who conjured so much desire that white men made her concubines, and slave-traders scoured the states for enslaved girls that fit her description to fulfill buyer

demand. That was the myth, the dominant story ... There is one other key characteristic of the mythic American Quadroon: she was to be found only in New Orleans (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stacy-parker-aab/quadroons-for-beginners-d_b_3869605.html accessed April 23, 2017).

Georgia, the setting of place of Child’s short story, is one of the slave-states “By the era of the American Revolution (1775-83), slavery was legal and African slaves constituted nearly half of Georgia's population” (<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-antebellum-georgia> accessed April 23, 2017). The ban of inter-racial marriage was finally invalidated in 1967 in Georgia (<http://jimmccullough.com/marriage.htm> accessed April 23, 2017). However, there is an ironic fact in the post-bellum South concerning the freed slaves: “The 13th Amendment, adopted late in 1865, officially abolished slavery, but freed blacks’ status in the post-war South remained precarious, and significant challenges awaited during the Reconstruction period (1865-77)” (<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery> accessed April 23, 2017). In other words, if shortly after the legal abolition of slavery the ex-slaves are still subject to racial treatment, it can be concluded that their lives in the antebellum must be miserable whatever the shade of their dark skin.

Since the focus of analysis is the female descendants of the mixed-race marriage, the suitable frame of analysis is feminist criticism which “reads writing and examines

its ideology and culture with a woman-centred perspective” (Humm, 1995: 51). Considering that the author is a woman, this analysis is also a gynocritic one which “is concerned with woman as writer” (Showalter, 1986: 172). The gynocritic analysis digs into the author’s purpose of constructing mixed-raced female characters in her short story entitled *The Quadroon*.

The method of analysis used in this paper is a literary criticism method called ‘Contextual Analysis’

(<http://www.unl.edu/english/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html> accessed February 17, 2014) in which the intrinsic elements especially character, conflict, and setting are combined with the extrinsic concepts around slavery such as one-drop rule, miscegenation, and quadroon. This analysis is qualitative in nature and based on library research.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The focus of discussion is on the two mixed-race females, a mother and a daughter, by the names of Rosalie and Xarifa. Both have a tragic ending due to the cruel hands of slavery.

Setting of Place, Time, and Social.

The setting of place of Child’s “The Quadroon” is in a beautiful and peaceful place in Georgia: “Not far from Augusta, Georgia, there is a pleasant place called Sand-Hills” (Child, 1994: 88). The setting of time is during slavery or before the abolition time: “The edicts of society has built up a wall of separation between her and them” (Child, 1994: 88). The social setting is middle class, rich but keeping away from the crowd: “Among the beautiful cottages that adorn it was one far retired from the public

road, and almost hidden among the trees. It was a perfect model of rural beauty ... The gateway rose in a Gothic arch, with graceful tracery in iron-work” (Child, 1994: 88).

The Fate of Rosalie

Rosalie, the mother, is: “a quadroon; the daughter of a wealthy merchant of New Orleans, highly cultivated in mind and manners, graceful as an antelope, and beautiful as the evening star” (Child, 1994: 88-89). Rosalie not only has a typical enchanting quadroon beauty but she also has a bright mind and perfect manners.

A Short Happy Life

The alluring beauty, the excellent intelligence, and the impeccable behavior cannot be resisted by “a handsome and wealthy young Georgian” (Child, 1994: 89), a white man, by the name of Edward. They deeply and purely fall in love despite the haunting race problem between them. Truly worshipping love and realizing that it is impossible to be united legally in marriage because “a union with her proscribed race was unrecognized by law” (Child, 1994: 89), Rosalie settles for “a marriage sanctioned by Heaven, though unrecognized on earth” (Child, 1994: 89). Thus, Rosalie and Edward are united by love without legal bond.

Betrayed by the Husband’s Ambition

For around nine years they live in total happiness oblivious to the commotion of the world outside the heavenly Sand-Hills. The birth of Xarifa completes their happiness. However, long-lasting happiness is not for the mixed-race descendants in the antebellum South. Getting more mature, now Edward is 28 years old, he needs more challenge. Although “He still loved Rosalie” (Child,

1994: 89), his adventurous spirit formerly satisfied by the valuable secret family now needs another challenging channel. Gradually but inevitably, he becomes an ambitious man involved in politics (Child, 1994: 90). The gambling nature of the newly taken path excites him.

The excitement of the new game estranges Edward from Rosalie and draws him closer to Charlotte, the only daughter of an important person that can realize Edward's ambition in politics (Child, 1994: 90). Although Edward tries to resist the pull, the lure of ambition and public life outweighs the peacefulness of secretive bliss. The plain Charlotte, the symbol of respectable public life of the white society, gradually overshadows the alluring Rosalie, the symbol of love, peacefulness, and happiness forbidden by the racist public.

A Noble Decision, A Tragic Ending

The perceptive Rosalie, finally confirmed by Edward himself of the coming marriage between him and Charlotte (Child, 1994: 92), takes a noble but hurting action in the form of a non-negotiable decision: "This is our lasts. To meet thus is hence-forth crime. God bless you. I would not have you so miserable as I am. Farewell. A last farewell" (Child, 1994: 92). Although Edward tries to refuse Rosalie's fixed decision, he cannot shake her decision. His trying to persuade her to be his secret wife or mistress only leads to hurt more Rosalie's dignity and self-esteem as can be seen in "the storm of indignant emotion his words excited" (Child, 1994: 92).

Although the noble decision is fatally self-hurting, Rosalie is unwavering. It indicates

that Rosalie keeps the purity of love. Once the sanctity of love is trespassed, there is no turning back. She loves totally and faithfully, however she will not force Edward to do the same. For her love and marriage need a total commitment forever. She prefers to live with her only child, Xarifa, in the secluded cottage at Sand-Hills.

Actually, Edward himself at the last parting realizes that he loves Rosalie deeply, however it is not possible for him to cancel the coming marriage: "At that moment he would have given worlds to have disengaged himself from Charlotte; but he had gone so far, that blame, disgrace, and duels with angry relatives, would now attend any effort to obtain his freedom" (Child, 1994: 92). So Edward legal marriage is haunted by the image of the noble but devastated condition of Rosalie at the last parting (Child, 1994: 93) which sometimes slips in his whispering tenderly Rosalie's name in his sleep (Child, 1994: 93).

It can be said that both try to get through each own suffering, Rosalie sustains herself for the safety of beloved Xarifa while Edward is trapped in the loveless marriage driven by his ambition. For a while the hurtful memory seems to be kept at bay until finally Rosalie-Xarifa are accidentally face to face with the newly-wed couple, Edward-Charlotte around Sand-Hills. Charlotte persuades Edward to visit the beautiful Sand-Hills on one afternoon drive and accidentally they meet Rosalie and Xarifa. Not knowing that Edward also suffers a lot with the separation and his loveless marriage, Rosalie feels deeply hurt by the appearance of the newly-wed couple that makes her "tottering with faintness" (Child, 1994: 94). No more

able to keep her spirit to live for the sake of the beloved Xarifa “About a year after Edward’s marriage, she was found dead in her bed, one bright autumnal morning” (Child, 1994: 94). Rosalie, a true worshipper of love, faithfulness, and commitment, is too vulnerable to face betrayal from the loved one. Reality is too harsh for her tender spirit full of love. Rosalie leaves Xarifa to face the world without the protection of a loving mother.

The Fate of Xarifa

The death of the down-hearted Rosalie drives Edward to the side of the grieving Xarifa: “Edward came to the funeral, and wept long, very long, at the grave ... The poor child sobbed herself to sleep on his bosom” (Child, 1994: 95). Edward is now the sole protector of Xarifa.

A Short Happy Life

The two grief-stricken people become close once again: “From that time, Xarifa was the central point of all his warmest affections. He employed an excellent old negress to take charge of the cottage, from which he promised his darling child that she should never be removed” (Child, 1994: 95). Edward also pays great attention to Xarifa’s education in music and dancing and in his frequent visit he always brings “a present of books, pictures, or flowers” (Child, 1994: 95) to show his great love, encouragement, and attention.

Xarifa inherits the beauty of her quadroon mother: “Her complexion, of a still lighter brown than Rosalie’s, was rich and glowing as an autumnal leaf. The iris of her large, dark eye had the melting, mezzotinto outline, which remains the last vestige of African

ancestry, and gives that plaintive expression, so often observed, and so appropriate to that docile and injured race” (Child, 1994: 89). Her beauty, carrying “its Moorish origin” (Child, 1994: 89) grows with the passing of time. Her father, Edward, admires her blossoming beauty, however, he is also a realistic person who knows very much about the racist society’s rule concerning the mixed-raced descendant. He is worried with her daughter’s future: “She belonged to a proscribed race; and though the brown color on her soft cheek was scarcely deeper than he sunny side of a golden pear, yet was it sufficient to exclude her from virtuous society” (Child, 1994: 95). Xarifa’s mixed race makes her subject to the racist rule if she is not legally protected.

Betrayed by Fate

Edward determines to keep Xarifa away from the reaching hands of slavery. He remembers Rosalie’s idea to move to France, a country free from the slavery rule, a wish that he cannot fulfill due to his ambition and marriage to Charlotte. Now he really has the intention to make a preparation to move Xarifa to a country without racist rule (Child, 1994: 95). The plan is totally unrealized because Edward, who often gets drunk after the death of Rosalie, falls from his horse on the way to visit the beloved Xarifa and dies (Child, 1994: 95). This is the first bad fate for the “scarcely fifteen” Xarifa. She has no protector anymore. However, Charlotte “with kindness of heart worthy of a happier domestic fate” (Child, 1994: 95) will not drive Xarifa away from Sand-Hills although Edward does not make any legal will about his daughter. For a moment Xarifa can postpone the bad fate waiting for her.

The loss of her father's love and attention is replaced by the love and attention of a lover, George Elliot, who is "Her teacher on the harp ... a handsome and agreeable young man of twenty, the only son of an English widow" (Child, 1994: 96). When Edward was still alive, he lets the love between these two young people grow in the hope that "English freedom from prejudice should lead him to offer legal protection to his graceful and winning child" (Child, 1994: 95). However, due to some forms of bad fate, this hope is unfulfilled.

The first form of bad fate is concerning the legal status of Rosalie and Xarifa: "Rosalie, though she knew it not, had been the daughter of a slave; whose wealthy master, though he remained attached to her to the end of her days, has carelessly omitted to have papers of manumission recorded" (Child, 1994: 96-97). In other words, Rosalie and thus Xarifa has no legal protection against slavery. So far they live peacefully and happily in Sand-Hills because nobody has the intention to snatch their freedom.

The second form of bad fate is brought by the legal heirs of the white master who badly need money to pay their great debts: "His heirs had lately failed, under circumstances, which greatly exasperated their creditors; and in an unlucky hour, they discovered their claim on Angelique's grand-child" (Child, 1994: 97). No parents, no protector, no legal document, Xarifa's position is very vulnerable. In one sweep, her happy life turns into the worst nightmare. The beautiful Xarifa, used to living freely and enjoying the beauties of life, is suddenly: "ruthlessly seized by a sheriff, and placed on the public auction-stand in Savannah. There she stood,

trembling, blushing, and weeping; compelled to listen to the grossest language, and shrinking from the rude hands that examined the graceful proportions of her beautiful frame" (Child, 1994: 97). Xarifa is now an object, a beautiful merchandise to be bought by the highest bidder who has a lot of money. The darkest future of Xarifa is not known by her lover because he is visiting her mother (Child, 1994: 97) at that time. Even if he is present when the bad luck happens, he still cannot save Xarifa because he does not have a lot of money. Thus, Xarifa's life is now in the hands of the highest bidder turning out to be "about forty years of age, with handsome features, but a fierce and proud expression ... the wealthy profligate, who was determined to obtain her at any price ... As yet, her purchaser treated her with respectful gentleness, and sought to win her favor, by flattery and present" (Child, 1994: 97). It seems that Xarifa is in good hands, however her status is as a bought slave whose life, safety, and honor are on the hands of the owner, the white master who buys her for "five thousand dollars" (Child, 1994: 97).

A Hopeless and Helpless Ending

Even though surrounded by luxury from her owner, Xarifa always wants to run away from the mansion that holds her captive. Her letter to her lover shortly before she is sold as a slave enables George Elliot to track her. Bribing one of the slaves, he plans to free her and run away together. However, the slave is a double-crosser to get bigger money from the master. The plan turn to be a bloody mess: "Xarifa had scarcely given an answering signal to the low, cautious whistle of her lover, when the sharp sound of a rifle was followed by a deep groan, and a heavy fall on the pavement of the court-yard"

(Child, 1994: 97). The plan is uncovered and the lover loses his life on the hands of the wealthy owner. Sliding down using a rope in a panicked moment only to see “George, bleeding and lifeless at her feet” (Child, 1994: 97), Xarifa loses her hope, spirit, and mind at the same time: “One wild shriek, that pierced the brain of those who heard it, and she fell senseless by his side” (Child, 1994: 97).

After that heart-breaking event, Xarifa turns into a lifeless doll. She is so sorrowful that “moved the compassion even of her cruel purchaser” (Child, 1994: 98). Trying to soothe her mortal agony, the master even buys some of her things from the cottage in Sand-Hills. However, all these costly gifts has no effect whatsoever. Finally the master takes forcefully what is considered to be his right when he buys Xarifa. As a result: “In a few months, poor Xarifa was a raving maniac. That pure temple was desecrated; that loving heart was broken” (Child, 1994: 98). The debasing and abusing treatment on top of a mortal agony that she has to endure is too much for her. She escapes from the misery using the only way and the only means available: “and that beautiful head fractured against the wall in the frenzy of despaired” (Child, 1994: 98). Nobody mourns for her, even “Her master cursed the useless expense she has cost him” (Child, 1994: 98). Xarifa is just an expensive property that cannot function as expected by the purchaser.

The Author’s Purpose

As mentioned above, Lydia Maria Child, the author, is a white abolitionist who pays great attention on the lives of the marginalized people in America such as “Indians, slaves,

and women”. Through her short story entitled “The Quadroon” she wants to show her opinion concerning the life of mixed-race descendants in the antebellum South as can be seen in the last paragraph: “Reader, do you complain that I have written fiction? Believe me, scenes like there are of no unfrequent occurrence at the South. The world does not afford such materials for tragic romance, as the history of the Quadroons” (Child, 1994: 98).

By setting her short story in the antebellum Georgia, Child wants to emphasize that no matter how far it seems you are from the inhumanity of slavery, as long as you have a drop of black blood without legal document to free you, you are subject to slavery. Child also wants to point out that slavery always has destructive effects on those with black blood. The destructive effect might be circular as what happens to Rosalie-Edward marriage that have no legal document which later leads to a direct horrible effect on the life of Xarifa, their only child, as she is considered as a slave and can be sold.

By constructing female quadroons of exceptional beauty with bright minds and high esthetics as her characters, Child wants to show that mixed-race descendants who are underestimated in the antebellum South actually have the same ability as the white female counterparts, only covered in a different form of beauty. They have the right as human beings to create and keep their own happiness and to be respected as full human beings. Slavery has been abolished, however the victims of the horrible practice are not to be forgotten. Their terrible experience becomes a good lesson to prevent whatever form of slavery and racism among human

beings. The suicide chosen by Xarifa seems to indicate a defeat on her side but actually it is a sign of control that Xarifa still has at that time, the control to end her life as she wants.

CONCLUSIONS

The quadroons are mixed-race people with a quarter of black blood. The female quadroons are famous for their exotic beauty. However, in the antebellum South, for example Georgia, they are considered as slaves if they have no legal document or manumission. The mixed-race marriages are also banned at that time.

The cornered position of the quadroons is portrayed dramatically by Lydia Maria Child in her short story entitled "The Quadroons". The mother, Rosalie, is banned from marrying legally with Edward. Thus, their children, Xarifa, has no legal status as the daughter of Edward, a white Georgian. The problem becomes more precarious when, after the death of Rosalie and Edward, it is discovered that the mother of the late Rosalie, who is a slave, has no manumission. It means that the late Rosalie is a slave and Xarifa is also a slave. As a slave, Xarifa is sold by the legal heirs of the white great-grandfather to pay their debts. Unable to face the tragic death of her white lover in the hands of her purchaser and to endure the sexually abusing treatment from her purchaser, she prefers to claim death.

REFERENCE

Behrendt, Stephen C. 2008. "Contextual Analysis" (<http://www.unl.edu/english/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html> accessed February 17, 2014).

Child, Lydia Maria. 1994. "The Quadroons" in *Rediscoveries: American Short Stories by Women, 1832-1916*. Barbara H. Solomon (Ed.). New York: A Mentor Book. Pp. 88-98.

Davis, F. James. "Who is Black? One Nation's Definition" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html> accessed June 28, 2015)

Le Melle, Stacy Parker. "Quadroons for Beginners: Discussing the Suppressed and

Sexualized History of Free Women of (Color with Author Emily Clark"

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stacy-parker-aab/quadroons-for-beginners-d_b_3869605.html accessed April 23, 2017)

Humm, Maggie. 1995. *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. Second edition. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a Feminist Poetics". 1986. *Contemporary Literary Criticism. Modernism Through Poststructuralism*. Robert Con Davis. New York and London: Longman.

Young, Jeffrey Robert. "Slavery in Antebellum Georgia"

(<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/slavery-antebellum-georgia> accessed April 23, 2017)

"Brief History of Marriage Meddling in the United States"

(<http://jjmccullough.com/marriage.htm> accessed April 23, 2017)

"Miscegenation"

(<http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social->

reform/sociology-general-terms-and-
concepts-8 accessed April 23, 2017)

“The “One-Drop” Rule and Racial
Identification By Whites, Blacks, and
Native Americans”

(<http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/onedrop.html> accessed April 23, 2017)

“Slavery in America”

(<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery> accessed April 23, 2017)

“Quadroon”

(<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/quadroon> accessed April 23, 2017)

“Lydia Maria Child”

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/lydia-maria-child> accessed April 23, 2017)