Driven Toward Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio

Author: Nikki M. Taylor
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Reviewer: Hediye Özkan, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Anchored in history, Driven Toward Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio is an interdisciplinary study tracing the answers why Margret Garner, an enslaved woman from northern Kentucky, murdered her infant daughter while trying to escape slavery. In the “Introduction: Bodies and Souls,” Nikki Taylor mentions that Driven Toward Madness is concerned with deadly violence of enslaved women whose soul is murdered due to interior and exterior injuries caused by slavery. Using historian, Nell Irvin Painter’s concept of “soul murder” to explain the experiences of enslaved women, specifically Margret Garner, Taylor situates her work into a psychoanalytical framework to provide explanations of Garner’s attempt to kill her children instead of her owner. Relying primarily on historical research along with black feminist theory, trauma studies, pain studies, genetics, history of emotions, and literary criticism, Driven Toward Madness brings the real and historical Margaret Garner into focus as a traumatized black female, and underlines how slavery damaged the roles of African American women as women, mothers, and wives.

Rejecting the distorted depictions and fictionalized images of Margret Garner, who is reduced to various symbols such as a black female hero or feminist by abolitionist, proslavery folks, and contemporary women’s rights advocates, Taylor “deal[s] with her as a traumatized black female in historical, social, cultural, and political terms” (p. 6). This is the significant contribution of the study to the scholarship on an important historical figure, Margret Garner, and black women’s voices and agency in history. Carrying the trauma of slavery in both personal and collective level, Garner and her trauma is at the center of Taylor’s historical question investigated in six chapters.

Each chapter begins with a poem as a reference to Margret Garner and the tragic death of a daughter in the hands of her own mother. The first chapter of the book, “Hope Fled” examines how the Garners, an extended family of eight people living on two different farms in northern Kentucky, escaped slavery in January 1856. This chapter also investigates what makes the Garners’ escape unusual, and what happened when their owners found them in Margret’s cousin’s house in Cincinnati ten hours after their escape. Referring to the historical sources such as federal and state laws of Kentucky and Ohio, newspaper accounts, murder indictments and requisition orders, letters of prosecutors, and manuscript collection of John Pollard Gaines, Margaret Garner’s owner, and the first chapter illuminates how the political system was designed to benefit slaveholders. Titled “Before the Blood,” chapter two focuses on the history of slavery in Kentucky along with the Gaines family, the Marshall family, and the Garner family. Discussing abroad marriages and hiring-out system which separate black families and denied the rights of enslaved wives and husbands to practice motherhood and fatherhood, this chapter suggests multiple reasons for Garner’s escape such as physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, the fear of being sold and separation, and the desire for freedom. Chapter three, “After the Blood” discusses the prosecution process of the Garners under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and Margaret who murdered one of her daughters and attempted to kill her other children. Referring to Margaret’s conversations with two ministers and a women’s rights advocate and abolitionist,
Lucy Stone while in custody before the hearing, Taylor gives Margaret a voice although the silence in her oral testimonies leaves more questions than answers about her truth. However, Taylor investigates Margaret’s silence through her trauma and body which can be a site of historical information and bore witness to the truth that Margaret endured physical and sexual abuse. Chapter four, “‘Faded Faces’ Tell Secrets—or Do They?” focuses on the possibility of Margaret’s sexual exploitation which was first raised during the fugitive slave hearing by Lucy Stone, who accused Gaines of sexual abuse and insinuated his paternity of Margaret’s children. This chapter illuminates how enslaved women were the most sexually vulnerable and legally unprotected class in antebellum society. Chapter five, “Driven by Madness, Badness, or Sadness” examines whether Margaret had been driven by vindictiveness, impulsiveness, rebelliousness, or madness, and why she did not kill Gaines if her murder is a form of resistance. Rejecting the accusations of madness, Taylor explains Margaret’s action through altruistic filicide, (mercy killing) a psychological term used to define a parent who believes that he or she is saving the child from an unbearable condition, disease, or anticipated suffering. The last chapter, “A Kind of Hero” discusses how Garner was used as a protofeminist caricature, a women’s rights symbol, an abolitionist hero, and a convenient proslavery stereotype. The Postscript at the end of the book mainly focuses on what happened to Margaret’s husband, Robert after the hearing as well as when and how Margaret, Robert, and Gaines died.

Being technically a biography, the book offers an intensive research and multidisciplinary analysis to understand the circumstances forcing a mother to kill her own child. However, it falls short on its argument about Margaret’s sanity since the title of the book ironically implies the possibility of her madness. Even if not in terms of fiction, the book still crafts a “story” of Margaret in chapter four and five which merely rely on possibilities, interpretations, and the words of others about Margaret due to her silence and the lack of historical records and archives about African American women. As is, Driven Toward Madness stands as one of the handful of books written about enslaved women and accessible to both scholars and students in the field, and people outside of academia.