



## **Erasure of Identity and the Quest for Self Articulation in Black Slave Narrative**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper intends to study a slave narrative memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) by Solomon Northup, a born free African-American man from New York State who is kidnapped and sold into slavery. The book was adapted into *12 Years a Slave* (2013), a colossal Hollywood success, instrumental in 2014 being hailed as the year in which Black Cinema has bounced back to tell some complex, honest and unflinching stories about life in America. The protagonist, Northup, had to work in cotton plantations for 12 years in the state of Louisiana before he could be rescued and released. The paper will highlight Solomon Northup's epic struggle against the violence perpetrated by the malevolent owner of the plantation as Northup strives to hold onto his identity which is being erased in front of his eyes. The paper will analyse how the book grapples with issues of racial identity, exploring a young man's suffering and frustration for no fault of his.

### **Keywords**

Black memoir, slave narrative, identity, violence, memory

‘There’s a sin, a fearful sin, resting on this nation, that will not go unpunished forever’ (174)

The construction of personal and collective identity has at its core, the issue of the representation of the stakeholders, either as the individual or the universal. Various identity theorists reject the notion of the subject as an individual construct and replace it with the interpretation of the subject as the center of racial, sexual and ethnic identity. The construction of dominant and marginal discourses, therefore, hinges on the apt placing of the subject at the center of a narrative, especially in the case of literature written by ethnic minorities. Such literature is usually the result of agony and violence faced over generations and expressed as recalled memory, leading to the formation of a narrative of the marginalised and the oppressed.

The history of America and American literature had conveniently by-passed the creative oeuvre of Black writers till about half a century ago. The four-hundred-year-old presence of the first Africans and then African-Americans in the United States has been largely negated. (Morrison 310). Morrison also addresses the treatment of African Americans in current society dealing with "racial discourse" (311), in addition, to ignoring matters of race and arguing that the traditional canon, taught and respected by much of society, ignores black's contribution to society. Morrison is also concerned with the lack of true African representation within the American canon, and says that what is within our American literature is an "invented Africa". She states, "American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are removed from and without relationship to the presence of black people in the United States" (310). It is only recently that there has been growing recognition of the literature written by women and by ethnic minorities, displacing the dominant literary and intellectual chronological accounts. It is the publication of ‘Poems on Various Subjects’ in 1773 by Phillis Wheatley, a nineteen-year old slave, born in Africa which inaugurated the integration of Black writers into the canon of American literature. However, African-American literature forms a highly complex and diverse body of writing with various visible dichotomies between themes of slavery and freedom, oral and written traditions, separationist and integrationist works, which have now entered the pages of surveys of American literature. The year 1760 marked the publication of the first of a long series of slave narratives and memoirs of African America slaves who had escaped or been freed. This span of American literature, just after the beginning of the nineteenth century is also ironically referred to as the Romantic period in the history of American literature or the American Renaissance.

One such memoir is *Twelve Years a Slave*, by Solomon Northup, a narrative of a black man, who was born free in NY state, kidnapped in Washington, DC, sold into slavery and kept in bondage for twelve years in Louisiana. Northup had to work on cotton plantations for twelve years before he could be rescued and released. The book is a heroic feat of memory, as Northup describes in minute detail each incident, person and location he encounters in his traumatic ordeal. This paper will highlight Solomon Northup's epic struggle against the violence perpetrated by the malevolent owner of the plantation as Northup strives to hold onto his identity which is being erased in front of his eyes.

The text of *Twelve Years a Slave* has been adapted into a major motion picture which is special in more ways than one – apart from the three Academy Awards it won for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actress and Best Adapted Screenplay, the film made its Director, Steve McQueen, the first black director to have directed a Best Picture winner as well as the first black producer ever to have received the award. 2014 was hailed as the year in which Black Cinema bounced back to tell some complex, honest and unflinching stories about life in America. The film version deserves special focus for its emphatic depiction of the director's fascination with the human condition as racism continues to taint the American dream.

Narratives of the self have formed a crucial staple in the formation, corroboration and consolidation of black racial identity. Issues which have dominated black memoirs include trauma and its aftermaths, exploration of identity and articulation of violence faced at the hands of white masters. The paper will analyse how the book grapples with issues of racial identity, exploring a young man's suffering and frustration for no fault of his. Questions about the 'literariness' of the text seem irrelevant in the context of the immense personal and racial abuse, trauma and suffering Solomon Northup undergoes in the telling of this harrowing tale which has the ability to shake even the deepest of slumbers.

Northup, the son of an emancipated Negro Slave, was kidnapped in 1841 and rescued in 1853. Significantly, he dedicates the book to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the anti-slavery novel credited with preparing the groundwork for the Civil War. Published in 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* changed the way Americans viewed slavery, becoming the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century. The immense popularity of this seminal work, along with the enacting of laws like The Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act probably led to the writing of *Twelve Years a Slave*. These two Acts together

eliminated what little legal protection fugitive slaves once had. After the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, any black could be taken from the street, accused of being a fugitive from slavery and sent south. The sub-title of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 'Life Among the Lowly' sets forth the abolitionist agenda that Stowe sought to propagate through the book. It is based on numerous interviews and slave narratives of the people who escaped slavery during the time Stowe was living in Cincinnati. The theme binding these texts together is the same - the institution of slavery, which springs from the concept of racial discrimination, which in turn, was and is, a slur on the great American dream. Various other issues found mention in the narratives of these times, including the issue of African colonization for freed slaves in states like Liberia, as opposed to amalgamation into American society.

*Twelve Years a Slave* documents facts supported in Stowe's book in detail, as the area where Northup was enslaved was close to the fictional setting of the plantation where much of Stowe's narrative takes place. The details are remarkable as the narrator comes across as a keen observer of people and events, describing cultivation of cotton and sugar in the deep south. Living in Saratoga at the time of his kidnapping, Northup travels to Washington DC with two men, who have assumed names. It is in Washington that Northup is kidnapped under the shadows of the Capitol,

Strange as it may seem, within plain sight of this same house, looking down from its commanding height upon it, was the Capitol. The voice of patriotic representatives boasting of freedom and equality, and the rattling of the poor slave's chains, almost commingled. A slave pen within the very shadow of the Capitol! (19)

6000 former slaves from North America gave accounts of their lives during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries with about 150 narratives being published as separate books. These narratives form the main body of African-American literature in the nineteenth century, which had as its theme; violence, memory and the construction of racial identity. In case of illiterate former slaves, editors, who were staunch abolitionists, collaborated in the writing of these narratives. As a result, the veracity of these narratives was questioned by influential historians, who asked for their validation. Between 1835 and 1865 more than 80 such narratives were published, recounting some prominent events in the life of the author like slave auctions, break-up of families and an account of escape. Northup himself acknowledge the increasing interest in such narratives of former slaves, "Since my return to liberty, I have not failed to

perceive the increasing interest throughout the Northern States, in regard to the subject of Slavery” (1). These narratives highlight the hard labour, poor diet and demeaning inhuman treatment meted out by the plantation owners.

America had slavery for 246 years and segregation till 1965 when civil rights laws were passed. According to Sinha, “Modern racial slavery was a monstrous hybrid that combined the horrors of an archaic labor system with the rapacious efficiencies of capitalism” (3). The opening lines of the text set the poignant note to the rest of the narrative,

Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free state-and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery, where I remained, until happily rescued in the month of January, 1853, after a bondage of twelve years - it has been suggested that an account of my life and fortunes would not be uninteresting to the public. (1)

As the text of *Twelve Years a Slave* starts winding its course over the travails of the narrator, it gives an account of Northup’s father’s life and thought process as he strives to shield Solomon from ‘the lash of the oppressor.’ Northup describes how his father died after performing ‘the duties appertaining to the lowly sphere wherein God had appointed him to walk.’ He accepts the ‘otherness’ of his race though his son may not have done so as a child. Later Northup mentions his dreams which included entering “upon a life of industry; and notwithstanding the obstacle of colour, and the consciousness of my lowly state...” (4). Amongst his passions were the practise of agriculture and playing on the violin, as he lived a normal life, having breathed the free air of the North.

His last night as a free man is described over a couple of pages, “The memory of that night of horrible suffering will follow me to the grave” (15). The word ‘memory’ occurs on almost every other page of the book, “There was a blank of some indefinite period, preceding my awakening in that lonely place, the events of which the utmost stretch of memory was unable to recall” (16). As Northup commends himself ‘to the God of the oppressed’ when he realises that he has been kidnapped, the helplessness that he feels shakes the reader to the core, “It could not be that a free citizen of New-York, who had wronged no man, nor violated any law, should be dealt with thus inhumanly” (16). He is re-named Platt, as was the custom in slave trade. Whenever he was re-sold the name of the buyer was appended to his leading him to become Platt Ford, Platt Tibeats and so on. Another major figure in the narrative, a woman named Eliza who is separated from her little children in a heart breaking moment, is

re-named Dradey. This erasure and re-assigning of identity was crucial to the purposes of the white masters for both technical and other reasons. It made the trade easier, removing several obstacles in paperwork, on the other hand, it became a type of initiation into Christianity at the hands of white masters.

Northup's only master who had any notion of humanity was William Ford, described as a 'kind, noble, candid, Christian man.' On Sundays, Ford gathers all the people on his plantation and reads the scriptures, inculcating the values of Christianity into his slaves. His brother-in-law, Tanner, too read the Bible to his slaves on Sabbath, commenting all the while on the interpretations.

In the winter of 1842, Northup was sold to John Tibeats for his carpentry skills and also because Ford was in a financially unsound state. Northup describes Tibeats as an evil master who takes immense pleasure in lashing the slaves for trivial or no fault of theirs. It is on Tibeats' plantation that Northup is subjected to mindless violence, and when he retaliates, the vicious institutional norms of slavery offer him no redressal or remedy. Northup vividly describes the measure of violence meted out to the slaves, 25 lashes for a small error, 50 for ordinary delinquency, 100 for severe (severe being 'standing idle in the field'), 150-200 for quarrelling with cabin mates and 500 for running away. The slaves are told to lash each other as even the person carrying out such a feat is not spared the agony of inflicting such a horrendous measure.

Northup does try to escape but is hounded as he reflects, "Really, it was difficult to determine which I had most reason to fear - dogs, alligators or men!" (88). 'A pass' is the lifeline of the black slave, otherwise, any white man was at liberty to arrest the black slave and put him in prison until the master proved that he was the white man's property, pay charges and take him away.

The temperamental differences between Northup and Tibeats do not allow Northup to stay on the latter's plantation for a long time and he is sold to another master, Edwin Epps. Epps is guilty of another type of violation, of the sexual violence he perpetrates on a slave girl, Patsey, who is caught between the lust of her master and the jealousy of her mistress. She is punished for the behaviour of her master, as the mistress is unable to reconcile with her husband's turning away from her. One of the most harrowing scenes in the film adaptation is the lashing of Patsey when she goes to the neighbouring farm to ask for a piece of soap, which her own mistress denies her lest she looks clean and appealing. Epps asks Northup to carry out the lashing. Patsey is whipped till she falls silent and then her wounds are washed with salt and water, "If ever there was a broken heart - one crushed and blighted by the rude

grasp of suffering misfortune - it was Patsey's" (168). Northup remains on Epps' plantation for 10 years suffering "undeserved abuse and stripes" (115), even as he describes Epps as a man who is "distinguished for his faculty of subduing the spirit of the slave" (116).

Any other man in Northup's place would have probably succumbed either physically or mentally to the inhuman treatment meted out to him, as the practice of slavery offered no recognition of the black subject as a human being. He was treated as an animal, a beast who had to be mastered or controlled. "A slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social non-person..." (Patterson 5). The single light in Northup's life was the hope of meeting his family once again. He sends letters from a ship, through other means too to tell his family that he is in captivity. But no means of release reaches him. He finally finds his saviour in the form of a wandering carpenter, Bass, who comes across as an abolitionist and does not hesitate to express his views, having decided to wage 'an unceasing warfare against the accursed shame of Slavery' and to accomplish Northup's liberty. Bass and Northup put together several letters addressed to Northup's family and friends in Saratoga. These letters finally reach the right person, Henry B. Northup, the master of Northup's father from whom the family adopted its name. Henry Northup manages all the papers required for Solomon's release and rescues him from Epps' hands.

This testimonial of slavery is an epic description of an institution which robbed millions of human beings from leading a life of dignity. Through this paper I have tried to highlight how the practice of slavery combined with mindless violence served to re-write the annals of identity formation over the centuries. Solomon Northup becomes the voice of thousands of such people whose families lived in the knowledge of their loved one being alive somewhere but unable to reach them. Today, the house in which the Northup family once lived is a tourist attraction as is the plantation of Edwin Epps, attracting numerous curious visitors. But, nothing could bring back those 12 years for Northup and his family, except the memory of what might have been if the colour of his skin had been different.

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