

Slavery and Narratives of African Americans: Reflections on Race Relations

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Abstract: The present paper aims to deal with the history of slavery in the United States of America that has produced narratives about it. The American slavery was based on race and only the persons of African descent were enslaved. So the institution was all-important in setting the course of American race relations. To understand America or American culture in general and the African American culture in particular, it is necessary to understand how slavery influenced the American life before 1865. It is also necessary to understand how that influence cast a long shadow over all American people in about one and half century since its abolition. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the slave narratives helped the blacks and the whites to discuss topics related to slavery and freedom. The most influential slave narratives of the antebellum era were designed to enlighten the white readers about both realities of slavery as an institution and humanity of black people as individuals. Thus, the slave narratives produced in the nineteenth century by former American and British slaves, which had a significant impression in literature and historical curricula in American universities today testify to the power of these texts. They also provoke a reflection and debate amid their readers, particularly on questions of race, social justice, and the meaning of freedom.

Keywords: Slave narratives, African Americans, slavery, literary tradition

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I. INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

The slave narratives are essential to the study of American history and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As historical sources, they document slave life primarily in the American South from the invaluable perspective of first-hand experience. Increasingly in the 1840s and 1850s, they revealed struggles of African Americans in the North as fugitives from the South, and recorded their experiences of discrimination and their aspiration for freedom. Hence, the slave narratives can be taken as key testimony in the historical study of American slavery.

From the literary point of view, the slave narratives and their fictional descendants comprise one of the most extensive and influential literary traditions in African American literature and culture known as the slave narrative tradition. The slave narratives outnumbered novels written by the African Americans until the Depression period in the 1930s. Some of the classic texts of American literature bear the direct influence of the slave narrative tradition. The influential nineteenth century novels like H. B. Stowe's *Uncle Tom*, and M. Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and the twentieth century novels like W. Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) exemplify such texts.

The slave narrative, a form of autobiography with its own structure and distinctive themes, traces the protagonist's path from slavery to freedom. Though the autobiographical works like F. Douglass's *Narrative* and H. Jacobs's *Incidents* exemplify original slave narratives, many fictional works on the subject of slavery by the twentieth century African American writers have been considered as slave narratives because they continued to work with the legacy of slave narrative writing. In this way, the slave narratives and their fictional descendants have been the focal point in debates about slavery, freedom, and African American identity.

II. DISCOURSE ON RACE RELATIONS

The history of African Americans is a branch of the history of the mainstream America, forming an ethnic group in the United States. F. W. Hayes III (2001), in this regard, defines it as "a history of struggle for human rights, socioeconomic development, and collective survival" (p. 15). The African American history begins through the Atlantic slave trade and chattel slavery that the histories of Africa, Europe, and the Americas mix together. The majority of African Americans descended from slaves and were either sold as prisoners of war by African states or kidnapped directly by European and African slavers. Others who were considered as African Americans include voluntary immigrants from Africa, South America, and the Caribbean.

In the beginning, the contact between Western Europe and West Africa was considered to begin in the mid-fifteenth century through an exchange of goods. After a century and half, some Europeans transformed that exchange into the capture and trade of Africans. The turbulent voyage of the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas included the genocide of millions of Africans. Among the total number of Africans transported to Americas, on average “between 6 to 16 per cent died” (Bigsby & Thompson, 1998, p. 150). It suggests that the voyage resulted in mass supply of population in human history. People of African regions from different culture and language groups were crammed into slave ships and forcibly taken into the American shores. These groups include Bambara, Malinka, Fon, Dinka, Ewe, Bakongo, Mende, Igbo, Yoruba, Ashanti, Wolof, Serer, Susu, and hundreds more (Hayes III, 2001, p. 16). Thus, the American-based institution of chattel slavery was the context in which the members of this pan-African population struggled and changed themselves into a new, yet very old, American people known as African Americans.

The institution of slavery existed in the United States from 1619 to 1865. Slavery, as D. R. Wright (2001) argues, remains “an underlying factor in the country’s social, economic, and cultural history” (p. 121). Hence, it played a central role in the history of the United States. It was practiced in all English mainland colonies and came to dominate the agricultural production in the states from Maryland South. The American Civil War (1861-1865) was the result of debates over slavery that finally brought slavery to an end. After the Emancipation, overcoming the legacy of slavery remained a crucial issue in American history, from the Reconstruction following the war to the Civil Rights movement a century later.

Slavery appeared throughout history in many forms and many places. In the United States, however, slavery emerged as a system of forced labor designed for the production of staple crops. Such a racial component distinguished this modern Western slavery from the slavery that existed in many other times and places. The vast majority of slaves were the black Africans and their descendants who were considered as “less human than whites, closer to the beasts” (Wright, 2001, p. 123) while the vast majority of masters were white Europeans and their descendants. Adding that the Africans were defined as an inferior human being, N. Campbell & A. Kean (1997) say, “The slave acted as an Other or a mirror against which the whites measured themselves and their value systems and to assume the inferiority of the African thus bolstered the power of the whites. The master/slave system was grounded in denials: of black history, identity, humanity, community, knowledge and language. These were all seen as means through which slaves might assert themselves and ultimately question their condition in relation to the dominant group. To deny or erase these was, therefore, a method of control, a device to deny the slaves’ identity and history and enforce an impression of being adrift, worthless and devoid of ancestry” (p. 76). Hence, the American slavery was based on race, so only persons of African descent were enslaved. It means that the institution was all-important in setting the course of American race relations. “The slave,” as J. M. Ludlow (1864) says, “has no rights of property; is legally forbidden to develop his intellect by education” (p. 8). By changing the concept of race and strengthening the white racist sentiments, the debates about race were the results of the long-term enslavement of persons of African descent.

America was in a constant conflict due to the ongoing issue of slavery and the Africans were at the centre of it who were sold, bought, and used as workers on the American soil. For the Africans on American soil, that horrible journey started with developing territorial colonies at a time when the workers were needed to keep the economy of a new country solvent. What C. W. E. Bigsby & R. Thompson (1998) describe in the following passage is appropriate to understand the early period of such a practice: “Between 1619 and 1860 some 400,000 blacks were transported from Africa to what is now the United States. This was not a large number as compared with the total Atlantic slave trade which carried around 9.5 million from Africa to the New World, most of them to the sugar plantations of Brazil and the Caribbean. Whether slaves were transported direct to North America or by way of the Caribbean made little or no difference to the blacks themselves; torn from their families and villages, marched to the coast, confined in Barracoons to await a passing ship, then crammed below decks for upwards of two months, they were finally brought ashore to be auctioned off” (p. 150). Hence, the first African to arrive in the United States, known as the New World, is believed to have accompanied Christopher Columbus on one of his voyages to the Americas; African slaves began arriving shortly after 1492. There are records of slaves being in Haiti by 1501. The first blacks arrived in the British colonies almost two hundred years before Douglass was born.

The first blacks to arrive in America were bonded laborers known as indentured servants. They were believed to arrive in Jamestown in Virginia in August 1619. The number of Africans in the colonies was relatively small throughout the seventeenth century. Toward the end of that century, the Africans were brought to North America as slaves in larger numbers. T. Morrison (1989), in an interview, explains what happened during that time: “Slave trade was like cocaine is now – even though it was against the law, that didn’t stop anybody. Imagine getting \$ 1,000 for a human being. That’s a lot of money. There are fortunes in this country that were made that way” (p. 48). During those years and before the widespread establishment of chattel slavery, the colonists also experimented with two other sources of forced labor: Native American slaves and European indentured servants.

Since the British law did not specify the status of slaves, the colonists created their own slave codes, and these codes varied from state to state. It was, as F. W. Hayes III (2001) said, “the system of dehumanization and depersonalization designed and practiced by slave-owners in a desperate attempt to produce perfect slaves” (p. 17). Accordingly, the slaves were forbidden from carrying guns, taking food, striking their masters, and running away. All slaves could be flogged or killed for resisting or breaking the slave codes. Some slave states required both slaves and free blacks to wear metal badges. Those badges were embossed with an ID number and occupation.

In general, the colonists also denied civil rights to slaves, and punishment meted out to slaves was often harsher than that given to the whites for the same crime. In effect, there were two different legal codes: one for the whites, and another for the blacks. “The system of slavery,” as the black abolitionist William Wells Brown, in a lecture, says, “is a system that strikes at the foundation of society that strikes at the foundation of civil and political institutions” (as cited in Ernest, 2007, p. 226). His statement suggests that the system of slavery affected every aspect of American life: it corrupted every institution, degraded every ideal, and disturbed every life.

Unlike the slaves in Saint-Domingue, who rebelled against their French masters and established the black republic of Haiti in 1804, the slaves in the United States faced a balance of power that discouraged armed resistance. The slave-owners usually attempted “to awe the slaves with the sense of the slave-owner’s enormous power” (Hayes III, 2001, p. 17) so that they could stop the slaves for revolt. In spite of this, the slaves often ran away. The runaway slaves needed to have perfect escape routes and timing. Where to hide, finding food, and leaving the family and children behind became primary issues for escaping slaves. For example, many slaves ran off and lived in the woods or vast wilderness in the undeveloped American countryside. These slaves were called “maroons” (Jackson, 1997, p. 142), for they found remote areas in the thick forest and mainly lived off wild fruits and animals as food. Some of these maroons ran off, lived, and even married into segments of the Native American populations and were later called as Black Indians. Other fugitives remained within the South, heading for cities or swamps, or hiding out near their plantations for days or weeks before either returning voluntarily or being tracked down and captured.

But when it occurred, such resistance was always quickly suppressed and followed by a harsh punishment designed to discourage the future rebellion. Later, the severe punishment had to be faced whenever a hunted slave was caught and returned to bondage. In some instances, the planned slave rebellions were nipped in the bud before an actual outbreak of violence. Such aborted conspiracies occurred in New York in 1741, in Virginia in 1800, and South Carolina in 1822.

“In an atmosphere of repression and rebellion,” as F. W. Hayes III (2001) explains, “many slaves in the American South rose to kill their white oppressors” (p. 17). Some examples of the most notable uprisings included the Stono Rebellion near Charleston, South Carolina in 1739, an attempted attack on New Orleans in 1811, and the Nat Turner insurrection that rocked Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. The Turner insurrection, which at its peak included sixty to eighty rebels, resulted in the deaths of about sixty whites. The number of blacks killed during the uprising and executed or lynched afterward might have reached hundred, as R. Hedin (1982) writes, “During the 1830s, southern prickliness in reaction to the abolitionist onslaught, together with an intensified fear of rebellion engendered by Nat Turner’s 1831 revolt, accelerated the tightening of formal and informal slave codes throughout the South. As a result, slaves had even fewer rights and less legal recourse than before” (p. 636). Hedin means to say that like other slave revolts, this particular one caused great fear amid the whites, but it was not a serious threat to the institution of slavery.

Slavery was an increasingly Southern institution. The abolition of slavery in the North as a sign of “blacks moving from slavery to freedom” (Ruef & Fletcher, 2003, p. 451), which began in the revolutionary era and largely complete by the 1830s, divided the United States into the slave South and the free North. In this way, slavery was defined as an entity of the South. It meant that defending slavery was considered to be pro-Southern and opposing to slavery as anti-Southern. So the most Southern whites did not keep slaves, but still slavery was centered on the South, distancing from the rest of the country and the western world. If at one time slavery had been common in much of the Americas, by the middle of the nineteenth century, it remained only in Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Southern United States.

Thus, the fight against slavery remained central to American politics since the mid-1940s. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 essentially grew out of the existing state and federal laws regarding the capture of escaped slaves. The freeing of slaves in the North and the opening up of new territories in the West made fugitive slaves a national issue, which argued that “the slaves should be freed” (Bigsby & Thompson, 1998, p. 152). The first Fugitive Slave Act, passed by the Congress in 1793, stipulated that the slave owners or their agents could arrest and return escaped slaves from any territory or state. As the fight against slavery rose in the North in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Fugitive Slave Act began to lose its grip. The abolitionists and other sympathetic Northerners ignored the 1793 Act, and activists established a secret network of safe havens for fugitive slaves, stretching from the Deep South to Canada: the Underground Railroad. Since the 1793 Act was

ineffective, the American Congress passed another Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 in favor of the Southern states. This came into effect in an effort to preserve the Union.

The Northerners, who were committed to free soil, supported with an idea that the western territories should be reserved exclusively for free white settlers. In 1860, the election of Abraham Lincoln as president on a free-soil platform set off a major political and constitutional crisis, as seven states in the Deep South seceded from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America. Slavery was a troubling issue for American people because the obvious answer carried with it was “the implication not only of bloodshed but of the possible destruction of the nation itself” (Bigsby & Thompson, 1998, p. 152). The start of the Civil War between the United States and the Confederacy in April 1861 led to the additional secession of four states in the upper South. Other four slave states: Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri remained in the Union, as did the new state of West Virginia, which split off from Virginia.

Even though the Southern whites withdrew their support for slavery, they also wanted to preserve slavery one way or the other. “The slave-power has been overrun well” (Ludlow, 1864, p. 4) as the war dragged on, the Northern war aims gradually shifted from preserving the Union to abolishing slavery and remaking the Union. President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 with the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which was passed by the Congress in January and ratified by the states in December 1865. But during the Reconstruction period, the end of slavery was followed by a debate over the status of newly freed slaves. Later, as the African Americans desperately wanted to overcome the bitter legacy of slavery, they simultaneously continued to fight against segregation, racism and poverty. W. W. Brown (1847), in this regard, adds, “Slavery makes its victims lying and mean; for which vices it afterwards reproaches them, and uses them as arguments to prove that they deserve no better fate” (p. 57). In this way, even after the Emancipation, the abolition of slavery did not end racial discrimination and exploitation. The federal attempts to give former slaves full civil and political rights made headway for a decade following the Civil War, setting the course of black experience and American race relations for the next century.

Having considered the dire effect of slavery, the antebellum African Americans who had escaped from slavery and found their way to safety in the North recounted their personal experiences in the form of slave narratives. C. W. E. Bigsby & R. Thompson (1998), in this respect, observe in the following lines that the slave narrative set the African Americans to fight for ending slavery and aspiration for personal liberation: “Much the same could be said of the slave narrative, which was intended to do much more than narrate a history of injustice. It was a declaration of literary and social independence. It was simultaneously an assertion of selfhood and a set of political propositions” (p. 152). Hence, the slave narrative was an essential part of the anti-slavery movement that dominated the African American narrative tradition in the second half of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century.

III. SLAVERY AND THE LITERATURE OF ABOLITION

The slave narrative is a literary form, dealing with an autobiographical account that grew out of the experience of enslaved Africans in Britain and the United States. The narratives represent a genre to write the blacks into humanity, and provide “an in-depth view of the heinous nature of slavery from the perspective of those who lived as slaves” (Raynor, 2001, p. 23). Raynor means to say that the slave narratives became a powerful tool for rejecting the brutalities of the slave system. Thus, they document the horrors of slavery that defined the blacks as “simply a two-legged piece of property” (Ludlow, 1864, p. 10). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the slave narratives were important as they were a means to express woes of slaves, courageous and fortunate enough to escape slavery. Later, they were used by the abolitionist movement for evidence and motivation towards the destruction of institutional slavery.

The most important and most widely published author of African descent in the English-speaking world of the eighteenth century, Olaudah Equiano, founded the genre of African American slave narrative. His autobiographical work *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa, the African. Written by Himself*, published in 1789, established all of the major conventions reproduced in the vast majority of nineteenth and twentieth centuries factual and fictional African American slave narratives. As W. E. B. Du Bois has introduced Equiano’s work as “the beginning of that long series of personal appeals of which Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* is the latest” (as cited in Carretta, 2007, p. 44). While describing the success of this founder of slave narratives in redefining the image of slaves, V. Carretta explores the latest research on how Equiano invented and constructed his story based on only partially on the facts of his life.

The slave narratives were first published in the United States in 1703. But their publications grew during the Abolitionism period, especially from 1831 to 1865. Two most prominent slave narratives published during this period were Douglass’s *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents*. Other narratives of this

period include William Wells Brown's *Narrative of William W. Brown, Written by Himself* (1847), and Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (1831). These slave narratives not only exposed inhumanity of the slave system but also gave an incontestable evidence for humanity of African Americans.

Douglass's *Narrative* is the beginning of the African American tradition of slave narratives, especially belonging to the tradition of autobiography; thus, he became "an American icon through art" (Stauffer, 2007, p. 201). For example, his book sets out to condemn slavery and convert readers to the abolitionist cause. It narrates the life of an ex-slave and begins with his unknown birth date and paternity and ends at the moment of freedom. It exposes crimes and cruelties of his former masters, overseers, and other slaveholders, highlighting an essential inhumanity of slavery. Moreover, it emphasizes the natural love of freedom common to all humans and emphasizes the importance of literacy as a means to achieve it.

Douglass remains one of the most important figures in America's struggle for civil rights and racial equality. The view of J. Stauffer (2007) on Douglass as an important artist and humanist to express an essential humanity of all people and seek to fulfill the nation's democratic ideals as he observes: "Douglass draws on his memory and history to dismantle some of the dualisms that existed in antebellum America: slavery and freedom, man and brute, black and white, oppressor and oppressed, sacred and profane, Christian redemption and slaveholding churches" (p. 204). It is in interplay of dualities that Douglass re-situates events not only in chronological sequence but also in patterned significance.

Douglass's other autobiographical works like *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881) are much longer than his *Narrative* and these books deal with his views on racism and civil rights. The African American writers from Richard Wright to Maya Angelou are influenced by Douglass's autobiographies.

Though some scholars and historians regard Jacobs's *Incidents* as "genuine," its value as "a slave narrative was questioned or doubted, and for a host of reasons" (Smith, 2007, p. 189). One of the reasons as such is that it does not bear the fictionalized account of slavery. However, her book is heralded today as the first female narrative by an ex-slave that reveals brutalities inflicted upon enslaved women. In many ways, it is "a truly representative feminist tale" (Smith, 2007, p. 193). In this way, through her character, Jacobs speaks about her reasons for making her personal story of degradation, enslavement, and sexual exploitation. Also significant is the issue of literacy, which was often used as a metaphor for freedom because slaves who learned to read and write were often the ones who ran away.

The slave narratives were mostly written by men who had their experience of daring escapes and heroic actions. Many slaves, such as Douglass, went on to become spokespersons or political leaders later. In contrast, Jacobs was a woman slave whose narrative focuses on incidents in her life, in fact, "a true account of a slave woman's life" (Smith, 2007, p. 193). In addition, Jacobs' narrative does not follow the chronological order rather she often interrupts her narrative to address social or political issues, including the church and slavery, or the law on runaway slaves. Her book, like Douglass's *Narrative*, is part of the slave narrative genre extending back to Olaudah Equiano in colonial times. Often, Jacobs's book is cited as counterpart to Douglass's book.

Like Douglass, Jacobs, and many others, increasingly in the 1840s, the black abolitionists of prominence were fugitive slaves, who were people born in slavery in the South whose anti-slavery training was on the Southern plantations. Their stories became the most important kind of anti-slavery literature. The slave narrative such as Styron's *The Confessions*, which "spurred Black Power intellectuals to discuss issues about the representation of slavery, especially of violence, property, and identity" (Levecq, 2001, p. 161), gave rise to novels implicitly or explicitly intended to defend the Southern myth. Similarly, the slave narrative such as John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832) traditionally regarded as the first important plantation novel. The slave narratives, thus, became an important means of dialogue over slavery and racial issues between the whites and the blacks. The slave narratives of the 1840s also created a readership that Stowe then projected artistically with his story *Uncle Tom* in 1852.

After 1865, the former slaves continued to produce narratives of their bondage and freedom in substantial numbers. From 1965 to 1930, during which time at least fifty former slaves wrote or dictated book-length accounts of their lives, the ex-slave narrative remained the preponderant subgenre of African American autobiography. Two of the most important narratives are Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) and J. W. Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912). Washington's book, a simple autobiography, recounts his successful struggle to better himself. He became renowned for his efforts to improve the lives of African Americans. Johnson, in his book, explored the complex issue of race in his fictional autobiography about a mixed race man who is accepted for the white. The book effectively conveys the black American's concern with issues of identity in America.

From the Post-Reconstruction era to the Harlem Renaissance, the African American writers confronted the challenges of representing slavery in the time of freedom. Many witnessed a revival of interest in slave narratives. If the fugitive slave narratives had underlined slavery's horrors iconicized in "bullwhips and iron chains and auction blocks, and slave coffles and empty stomachs and broken hearts" (as cited in McDowell, 2007, p. 151), the post-bellum narratives, both fiction and non-fiction alike, were dedicated to hopes and future prospects of African Americans. To quote R. Eyerman, the African American writers of the Post-Reconstruction era were "shaped by the promise of Emancipation" and, thus, "looked expectantly toward the future, not the past" (as cited in McDowell, 2007, p. 151). Unlike slavery was treated as ultimate evil in the literature of abolition, the writers of this era treated slavery as a tragic condition which brought hardship and misery to black people, but provided grounds for racial uplift for a brighter future.

During the Depression of the 1930s, under the Federal Government's undertaking, the Work Projects Administration (WPA) used unemployed writers and researchers. It gathered oral personal histories and testimony about slavery from twenty-five hundred former slaves who had been a part of the American slave system until 1865. It generated roughly around ten thousand pages of interviews that were eventually published in an edition of eighteen volumes. Though many scholars continued to debate the value and reliability of these interviews and pointed to "the difficulties they present for historical accuracy and scholarly interpretation" (McDowell, 2007, p. 166), the narratives retell many interesting experiences of more than two thousand former slaves.

However, slavery was not abandoned as a topic for inclusion in the works of only slaves and ex-slaves writers. The slave narrative writers of the latter half of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century, who were not under the institution of slavery, continued their narratives termed as 'neo-slave narratives' against the background of slavery. In this way, the neo-slave narrative is part of black literary ancestry that continues to influence African American literature until today.

IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, both the African American literary tradition and the African Americans themselves are born of slave narratives. Texts that comprise the slave narrative tradition in American literature, in this sense, include not only original documents of the antebellum genre but also of post-bellum formations that take slavery as a topic of concern. These texts use slavery as a symbolic vehicle through which to discuss broader issues of identity and liberation that prevail over the African Americans in general and African American literature in particular.

While the slave narrative tradition is historically the original experience of the oppressed, the tradition now serves as a point at which one can gain entry to the experience of oppression imaginatively and literarily. For example, the neo-slave narrative writers, by imagining the condition of slavery, write in order to blend the past with the present. Taken together, the slave narratives, improving race relations in the United States, can be viewed in two ways: 1) powerful works of literary art as in the form of autobiography and fiction, and 2) persuasive tools for articulating and advancing abolitionist agenda as writings for political causes.

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