

Major Themes in Select Slave Narratives of Antebellum Era of America

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Abstract

In investigating the consequences of the institution of slavery on southern society of United States of America; the investigators come across a significant number of resources available that document slaves experience under the system. Slave narratives are criticized and kept aside for a long time. However, later scholars have come to know that these narratives play a vital role in reconstructing the history of antebellum south. Major themes in these slave narratives help in understanding the peculiar institution slavery. During the rise of the abolitionist movement, a large number of slave narratives are written and published. Twentieth-century published

works, also give comprehensive information about the lives of slaves and slaveholders in the period before the Civil War.

Keywords: Antebellum Era; Slave code; Sexual exploitation; mulattoe; Women resistance; Slaveholder's religion; African west coast tribe; Racism in post antebellum society.

Introduction

Most of the earlier slave narratives are written by white men or women as many slaves cannot read and write. McCarthy and Doughton mention oral sources of slave narratives written by others and have to face criticism:

Some narratives were, of course, transcribed from oral sources, like those here by Bethany Veney and Thomas Jones, and thus were subjected to inadvertent change or conscious tampering or improvement. (McCarthy xlvi)

However, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Aunt Betty's Story: The Narrative of Bethany Veney, A Slave Woman and Twelve Years a Slave: Solomon Northup are slave narratives written respectively by themselves. All these narratives are written and published in the antebellum era except Bethany Veney's. Harriet Jacobs's narrative is the first women slave narrative written by a slave woman. Foster F Smith identifies the distinct position of slave narratives in American literature:

The most important elements of the narratives were race and slavery, and as race became synonymous with slavery and as racial discrimination became institutionalized in the United States, the slave narrative became increasingly distinct from other forms of American literature. (Smith x-xi)

These slave narratives stand out in the African American slave literature, as these autobiographies set the foundation for topics like the determination, perseverance, motherhood, sexuality, hope, and freedom of slaves. McCarthy and Doughton believe that the narratives of slaves are repository of African American race's experiences as slaves:

The narratives reveal a "Collective African American intention to remember slavery and document, for the African American community, the lived experience of former bondsmen and enslaved women. (McCarthy xxv)

During the period when the institution of slavery is given legal sanctity in the United States of America, there existed a body of laws called slave codes to govern the business and management of the slaves. These set of rules are created to continue slavery system and to shield white people from the crimes they inflict on slaves. There are no laws in favour of black people and to protect their fundamental human rights. Life is unbearable for slaves under these regressive laws. Laws give power not only on the ownership of the slaves but also every aspect of their lives. Slaves never have share in the "American Dream". They are not even treated as human beings and the

citizens of the country in spite of colossal contribution to American economy. Even great American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson is puzzled to comprehend this:

I do not see how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute a state. I think we must get rid of slavery or we must get rid of freedom. (Emerson 2995)

Slave codes: The set of rules called slave codes are used to regulate every small aspect of slaves' life. Abraham Lincoln stands by the universal morals he says, "You must remember that some things legally right are not morally right" (Lincoln 48). Certain essential aspects of life like marriage and protection against rape are not given legal protection as they do not exist in the slave code. In general, these laws are protective towards slaveholders and cruel for slave men and especially for slave women. Pro-abolitionist William L Garrison says, "That which is not just is not law" (Garrison 220). One particular slave code says that, "the child shall follow the condition of the mother" it gives rise to new suffering of the slave women. This code is an added addition to the sufferings of the slave women by making them victims of rape in the hands of slaveholders. The children born to these slave women will become slaves to the slaveholders who fathered them. Thus, slaveholders make an economic profit in addition to their sexual pleasures out these encounters with the female slaves.

Punishments: Most of the slaveholders are brutal towards their slaves and go unpunished even for the

murder of a slave. Few slaveholders treat slaves well, but their number is almost negligible among the southern plantations. Slaves are punished with any object that slaveholders lay their hands upon. Slaves are tortured in different ways like imprisoning, beating, branding, whipping, mutilating, hanging and even killing with a gun. Blood hounds are raised for the purpose of hunting runaway slaves. These dogs devour the victim who hardly survives later. Dea H Boster expresses that many former slaves at pro slavery meetings display scars on their bodies to show the world the cruelties of slaveholders:

It was not uncommon for featured slaves to pull up their skirts or trousers to display scars on their legs, or to expose disfiguring whip marks on their backs. This exhibition of African American bodies was, in many ways, similar to the presentation of slaves at southern markets and auctions. (Boster 1)

The whip is the most common instrument always carried by the slaveholders and the overseers. Whipping is very common and unbearable for the slaves. Slaves are whipped for small reasons like being rude or being late. The slaves are whipped so hard that it is a common punishment imposed on both black men and women equally. However, female slaves endure other distinctive suffering, namely sexual exploitation at the hands of their slaveholders.

Frederick Douglass talks about an infernal torment given to his aunt Hester. He rebels against Mr. Covey the 'nigger-breaker', unable to bare his whipping. Frederick

Douglass gives an account of two female slaves Henrietta and Mary who are often hit on their heads and hardly fed by their maters Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hamilton in Baltimore. Harriet Jacobs gives accounts of various slaveholders where slaves are murdered and the society at large remains unmoved as if slaves' life has no value. Harriet Jacobs mentions Mr. Litch a rich planter owning six hundred slaves often goes unpunished even for the murder of a slave.

William Wells Brown talks about lynching of a slave in New Orleans. The slave's body is left in the streets unattended and the next day his body is carried away by trash collecting people in their trash cart. Mr. Cook the overseer and his friends attack Randall a well built slave. Unable to overcome him one of them injures him by a pistol. Later Mr. Cook ties an iron ball to the leg of Randall to break the slave's spirit. Solomon Northup is tortured by Mr. Burch before he was sold into slavery at New Orleans. Tibeats tries to hang Solomon Northup for his rebellion. When Solomon Northup confronts Tibeats second time, Solomon Northup runs for his life and blood hounds are set on him. Solomon Northup is quicker than the hounds and escapes unhurt. Solomon Northup gives details of how a young slave of Mr. Carey by name Augustus is hunted by his master's fifteen bloodhounds. Wilma A Dunaway observes the greed of slaveholders who are willing to sell slaves with chronically illness for medical testing:

*Because they could be marketed for medical testing,
slaves could be sold even after they were old or*

diseased. Medical colleges located at Lexington, Louisville...New Orleans...and Richmond regularly advertised to recruit chronically ill slaves, which their owners might wish to "dispose of" profitably. (Dunaway 43)

Sexual exploitation and origin of mixed race: Girls from a young age come to know that their bodies are not their own. Slaveholders always felt that they owned their slaves in total. Young and beautiful slave girls are highly priced as many slaveholders compete to buy them with clandestine motives. Harriet Jacobs's complaints that slave girls are not allowed being virtuous because their virtue is under unvarying attack from the male members of the slaveholders family, friends, relatives and the overseer.

Female slaves Sufferings owing to rape, as breeders and as concubines affect the male slaves as well. Male slaves cannot protect the women in their families from sexual abuse, and thus families get ruined. However, under deep anguish, they use aggressive methods of confrontation against the slavery system and their masters by arson and fighting, which threatened most of the slaveholders. This interracial forced relationship gives rise to a mixed rise of people in the southern society of the United States of America. People of the mixed race are called mulattos. The huge number of these mulattos is itself a colossal evidence of slaveholders' sexual exploitation of female slaves.

Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown openly confess in their narratives that their biological father is a

white man. In the case of Frederick Douglass it is his master who fathered him and William Wells Brown is fathered by a relative of his master. William Wells Brown talks about Mr. Walker, who fathered four children with his slave Cynthia but later he marries a white girl and sells his four children from Cynthia to make money. Harriet Jacobs talks about Dr. Flint who fathered nearly a dozen children through his illicit relationships with his female slaves by force. Even Harriet Jacobs's children are mulattos but her case is different as she willingly has a relationship with Mr. Sands to escape from old fox Dr. Flint.

Solomon Northup talks in detail about the abuse of Patsey by their Master Edwin Epps. Patsey suffers from both a licentious Master and a jealous Mistress. Once her master also turns jealous and Patsey is shown hell and her spirit broken forever by punishment. Solomon Northup also talks about a slave girl from the neighbouring plantation who is whiter than her master. Her name is Celeste; she hides in the swamps unable to work on the fields. Without doubt the mixed race is the result of sexual exploitations of female slaves in southern states of United States of America.

Women resistance: Only few female slaves resisted sexual advances of their masters. Many female slaves succumbed to pressure or do not have choice. Few female slaves willingly submitted expecting better treatment for her children but most of their expectations turn otherwise.

Slave women confronted their masters without the use of any physical force but through verbal rebuttal, escaping and stealing food to appease hunger. Some female slaves chose more brutal and horrible acts like infanticide to prevent their children to be slaves for life. At the time of their girl child birth, both Harriet Jacobs and Bethany Veney wish death for themselves and of their daughters. Especially their daughters from becoming slaves and thereby enduring all the sufferings they are experiencing. Frederick Douglass speaks highly of slave women contribution in antislavery cause:

When the true history of the antislavery cause shall be written, women will occupy large space in its pages, for the cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman's cause. (Douglass 51 or 367)

Family and community relations among slaves: Family and community of the blacks play an important role to survive in the slave system. In that dehumanizing system of slavery, many can survive because of the relations which these slave people maintained. It is reflected in all the slave narratives. In the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs it can be seen prominently. She succeeds in her attempts and escapes her trails with great difficulty only because of her family members and friends in her community. Slaveholders often separated the slave families by sale. Even in their deep anguish and soul murdering environment, the black community nurtured and protected its members. Bethany Veney when taken to the South to auction, she fights till the end and escapes

the auction. David McCoy brings back Bethany Veney back to Luray to her little girl. Later she comes to know about the debts of David McCoy and all his property including his slaves will be auctioned. Here she decides to fight back to keep her second child Joe. After American civil war Bethany Veney visits Luray and takes her relative to the northern states.

In William Wells Brown's narrative the bonding that he has with his mother and sister show how slaves tried their best to support each other. The love and care for each other shows the importance they give for family ties in spite of being helpless in slavery. William Wells Brown does not want to leave behind his mother in his efforts to escape to the North. The community feeling among slaves can be noticed in the slave narratives. Solomon Northup has strong community feeling saves many slaves from the whip while he acting as a slave driver on Mr. Edwin Epps plantation. He particularly saved the slave girl Patsey on many occasions. When he is seriously ill he is taken care by others slaves on the plantation. May be common suffering among slaves can be the reason behind community feeling.

Frederick Douglass confesses that he is not emotionally attached to his mother and his siblings because of early separation intentionally done by slaveholders. However, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown have strong community feeling that they dedicated their lives for the total abolition of slavery in United States of America and

also fought for better conditions and suffrage to their community. Frederick Douglass expressed that “slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot.” (Douglass 214)

Slave women’s motherhood: Almost all societies around the world give great importance to motherhood. However, it is a different case with slave women. Many intentionally give up their motherhood by abortions adopting primitive methods like chewing the roots of the cotton plant. They do not want to give birth to their babies in slavery. Because the slave system is so designed that the slave children face the fate of their mothers. Majority among slave women wished death for their child and to themselves if they give birth to a girl child. They know what girls have to go through after their childhood as they themselves are victims of sexual exploitations. Wilma King observes that victims of abuse have to live by themselves if impregnated:

In situations where enslaved women were forced into sexual intimacy, it was unrealistic for the victims of sexual abuse to expect any consideration from the men if pregnancy resulted. (King 42)

It is a different case with Jacobs, who willingly took up motherhood to escape the trials of Dr. Flint. Once she becomes a mother, she just lives for the sake of her children. In fact, she elevates the status of motherhood because she goes to great lengths to save her children. Motherhood, in its virtuous ideal, is represented by both Jacobs and her grandmother. Jacobs is more successful

than her grandmother. Jacob shows unequivocal love of a mother towards her children. It is her children who are the driving force for her to escape, to fight for her and her children's freedom. Fanny who escapes along with Jacobs lost all her children at the auction and there is no happiness for her in spite of her freedom.

William Wells Brown gives an account of a slave mother's one weak old child is gifted away by Mr. Walker the slave trader to his acquaintance because the child's cry annoyed him. Even William Wells Brown's mother suffers like any slave mother as her children are sold. Solomon Northup gives in detail how Eliza lost her children at the auction in New Orleans. Eliza fails to recover from the separation of her children and she dies prematurely. Wilma King also talks about hard labour given to pregnant slave women:

An unborn child's fate rested with owners, who required physical labor from pregnant and nonpregnant women alike. (King 43)

Education for slaves: Slaveholders succeed in controlling their slaves not just by physical brutality but also by keeping their slaves ignorant. Slaves are not allowed to read and write. It is a punishable crime if anyone tried to learn.

Frederick's story is like that of a one-person army who attains strength from literacy; books bringing his liberation. To Frederick, Douglass literacy gave physiological freedom before his escape. It also helps him to become one of the most exceptional public speakers

who influenced people and worked towards the abolition of slavery. Hugh Auld advises his wife Sophia Auld not to instruct Frederick Douglass to read and write. Hugh Auld gives the reason that if a slave is taught, he will become discontent and unmanageable.

“Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” shows the moral and perversion connected to slaves. For Harriet Jacobs, literacy helps to write letters to her master Dr. Flint to delude him in the search for her. Literacy helps Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass for educating fellow slaves. Both of them taught fellow slaves English alphabets risking punishment. Frederick Douglass stressed the importance of education to African Americans. Jacobs gave importance to education and tries educating her children.

William Wells Brown gets little education when he is sold to Elijah P. Lovejoy a teacher in St Louis city who teaches him. This helps him to understand and question slavery in United States of America. After his escape from slavery he subscribes ‘Genius of Universal Emancipation’ a newspaper while he is at Cleveland. He also buys and reads old books. Later he becomes great literary figure from African American community. Solomon Northup escapes from deadly seize of slavery only because of his education. He can read, write and takes help of Mr. Bass to and gets liberated

Slaveholders’ religion: Slaves were real followers of Christianity in the south. The slaveholders practiced religion by interpreting the Bible in their favour and not as

the word of God. Both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs come down heavily on the religious practices and the hypocrisy of slaveholders. Frederick Douglass in his editorial titled 'American Religion and American Slavery' to North Star:

What! Speak evil of the men who minister at the altar as the Most High? For such reckless wickedness – for such sacrilegious temerity, let his character be blasted forever, brand him infidel, stamp him an atheist, call his disorganizer, and warn the world against him as a most dangerous man. (Douglass 50-51)

Frederick Douglass observes slaveholders taking refuge in religion for their cruel deeds on slaves. He cites two religious ministers by name Mr. Weeden and Mr. Hopkins who made serious wounds on their slaves' back. Frederick criticizes the way the word of the bible is misinterpreted to suite the slaveholders. Harriet Jacobs says that Mrs. Flint in spite of being a church member is as cruel as Mr. Flint. During Nat Turner's rebellion slaveholders destroyed the little church the slaves built. But when the rebellion is subdued, the slaveholders decided to teach religion to slave with an intention to curb the rebellious tendencies among slaves. They misinterpret religion by saying that hurting earthly master is like hurting god. Ministers of the church can continue preaching even if they father a child with a slave woman. If the same minister fathers a child out of his marriage with a white woman then only he is removed.

William Wells Brown sarcastically talks about a Presbyterian minister who always tries to impress the slaveholders. The real word of god rarely comes out of his mouth. William Wells Brown also observes that slaveholders taking pains in preaching their slaves on Sabbath days and there by taking away the little free time the slaves have on Sundays. William Wells Brown and his mother are arrested on their way to northern states. William Wells Brown fails to comprehend when the man who arrests them prays with his family that night. Bethany Veney all through her life lives true to the word of god. But her Master David Kibbler is a religious hypocrite, for some time he does not allow Bethany Veney to the church. At the time of her marriage with Jerry she insists for a minister to perform it.

Solomon Northup is fails to understand the way slaveholders took support from religion in turning fellow human beings into slaves. He talks about a slaveholder by name Peter Tanner who goes to church every Sunday but treats his slaves worse than animals.

Slaves Finding Freedom: Slaves could free themselves only by two methods. One is by buying their freedom if the owner is willing and if not buying their freedom through an intermediary. The second one is to escape to the northern states of America and live as a fugitive. Escaping to northern states is not easy, life threatening hurdles are everywhere. Some of the slaves lost their lives; many of them are brought back to their master either to

be tortured or sold down the South. Abraham Lincoln opinions that pure slavery never gives hope, "Free labor has the inspiration of hope; pure slavery has no hope." (Lincoln 160)

Harriet Jacobs' narrative is completely different from other narratives which depicts spirited a woman who portrays herself to be a survivor, upright, adventurous and courageous woman who not only fights for her rights and freedom but her children's as well. Her narrative ends with her freedom along with her children having many dreams unfulfilled like owning a house, education, and settlement for her children. Her narrative shows that it is not easy to get out of slavery. Her uncle Benjamin almost lost his life on his way to New York due to illness and lack of provisions to sustain. Harriet Jacobs's brother William is luck as abolitionist freed him while he accompanied Mr. Sands to Washing D.C. Harriet Jacobs's uncle Philips freedom is purchased by his mother Aunt Martha.

Frederick Douglass fails in his first attempt but succeeds in his second attempt. After his escape, he never tells anyone about the way he got out of slavery because he feels that the escape routes will be closed by slaveholders. William Wells Brown's first attempt along with his mother fails. They are caught and brought back to their masters and as a result his mother is sold further the South. In his second attempt faces many difficulties on his way and falls seriously sick. He recovered with the help of an old couple.

Solomon Northup case unique, he approaches a kind white man named Mr. Bass. Through him he sends a letter to his friends in the North and is finally liberated. Bethany Veney is the luckiest one. Mr. Adams who has come to the South for copper mining purpose is impressed by Bethany Veney's honesty. He purchases the freedom of both Bethany Veney's and her son's and manumit's them. Just as observed by Rosemarijn Hoefte and Jean Jacques Vrij regarding manumission:

A number of house slaves, most often women who had loyally served their owners for many years and assisted them through difficult times such as illness or death, were granted freedom. (Gaspar 151)

Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Harriet Jacobs even after their escape start living as fugitives. They are freed by their respective well wishers by purchasing their freedom. Anthony A Iaccarino opinions that in spite of the differences among the abolitionists they are successful to send the message to the southern society:

In this sense they helped fuel the sectional animosity that resulted in both Civil War and the eventual emancipation of 4 million southern slaves. (Rodriguez 179)

Impact on African west coast tribes: Trans-Atlantic slave trade annihilated the established pattern of native life on the west coast of Africa. Millions of well built African youth belonging to various tribes are separated from families and forcefully uprooted them to make money on the other side of the ocean. Kidnapping and hunting of native

Africans is rampant and forced the natives to go further interior into harsh climate where they failed to survive. African natives' families, social structure and cultural identity are all gone forever. The slave trade affected both the left out natives as well as the ones shifted to American continent. Wilma King rightly questions the fate of both natives of the African west coast and the Africans in captive making that fateful journey:

What happened to the Africans left behind in their homelands is as important as what lay ahead for those who reached the seacoast and were imprisoned while awaiting final processing before the middle passage. (King 13)

The research can further focus on bigger questions like, what happened to the west coast tribes of African continent. How deadly are the devastating effects of slave trade on African society at large? How other family members survived, when separated from their dear ones and as their cultures destroyed on the western coast of African continent.

Racial problems in post antebellum society: With deep injustice and intolerance during slavery naturally the seeds of racism have unfathomable roots possible. White people in southern society argued and tried to defend that the African race is inferior in intellect than them. This deep-rooted prejudice continued seriously post-civil war and is found even today in United States of America. After civil war, many ex-slaves played a vital role in the fight for suffrage, women suffrage and racism. Frederick Douglass

fought for unbiased suffrage to all, he appeals to the Congress in January issue of, The Atlantic magazine, 1867:

The South does not now ask for slavery. It only asks for a large degraded caste, which shall have no political rights. This ends the case. Statesmen, beware what you do. The destiny of unborn and unnumbered generations is in your hands. Will you repeat the mistake of your fathers...As you members of the Thirty-ninth Congress decide, will the country be peaceful, united, and happy, or troubled, divided, and miserable. (Douglass)

United States of America survived the civil war and kept The Union intact to even today. But the promises of the constitutional fathers are yet to blossom and fruit, as the racism till spiting fire on the fertile lands of the greatest land on earth. Even in the 21st century the world is not yet free from slavery, definition may have changed but millions of hands are up in prayer for freedom to just live in the spirit of free humans.

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