

Aspects of the Narratives of Slavery in the Afro-American Literature as Represented by Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass' Works

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Abstract

Harriet Ann Jacobs' *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845) are two very significant works to show slave narratives Afro-American Literature. They provide many aspects in attempting to portray the complex sufferings and different kinds of frustrations, especially that the threat to the existence of their families and their rights as human beings in American society. The works present real stories and scenes lived by both writers in that dark era. The article makes a kind of comparison between them to highlight how both sexes suffered to the same extent. Jacobs represented the female side while Douglass represented the male side of black slaves in America through their works. The article aims to shed light on the brutal effect of slave and the crimes of the racist white American people upon these vulnerable people in a society of an ideal country in which the worst forms of racism are still practiced and the murder of George Floyd's crime is not far from us. Therefore, it is the duty of the free people of the whole world to expose these heinous acts and work to prevent them and support the oppressed.

Keywords- Ex-Slave, Slavery, Gender, Resistance, Social Justice

Introduction

The present research article is an attempt to examine the aspects of slavery and its influences upon the Afro-American literature. It emerged during the American Renaissance period in American Literature. Such genres can be considered as the autobiographies of ex-slaves. The works put lights on the basis of African American literary tradition as well as distinctive glances on the souls of slaves. These are the expressions of their experiences within bondage. Their feelings and expressions are very accurate and full of details that emphasize their misery under cruel masters and in the same time embody the strength of their will to get freedom for themselves. In this regard Frederick Douglass writes; "I feel education is important. Everyone should do good and also try their best. Nobody should take advantage of education. Some people want to go to school, but they can't. Education is important for our future; A high school student after reading Narrative of the Life of Douglass" (quoted in Adisa 42).

The scene of “literacy”, the ex-slave narrators were able to eradicate illiteracy, which they were suffering from before that, so the need of learning to read and write became possible in this period. Most of the slave narrators tried to represent the purity of their own as good Christian in the mean while they tried to discover the hypocrisy and oppressiveness of their supposedly pious owners. They were able to document the misfortunes of the slaves and the modernizers through their writings. They have documented officially what the slaves suffered. They tried to speak in their own voices in a search for selfhood that had to be stable against the aims and values of their audiences. In attempting to write an identity for the Afro-American people within a country that legally denied their justice to be and treat them as human beings. Because of the oppression of the white audiences, most of the Afro-American narrators write in a way that characterized by clarity and caution for fear of the white audiences. They were able to highlight the sufferings in their novels as their personal suffering so that the slaves would not be in danger, especially during the period from the early 1830 to the end of the Civil war in 1865. The slavery was legally in America, and during this period the African American writers perfected one of the nation’s first truly indigenous genres of written literature. They wrote about the slave and especially the northern American slave because the people there were more brutal upon the slaves than the Southern American people.

Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass could shape the stress between the conflicting motives that generated autobiographies of slave life. During this period the black society struggled with the abolishment of slavery and women’s rights. Douglass and Jacobs are good example for this struggle. Their narratives awoke the society to the atrocities of slavery. As this period The American Renaissance, distinguished as intellectual and artistic period Douglass and Jacobs succeed in declaimed the mind by their personal experience. They could represent the voice of slaves who desire freedom from bondage and reveal the impact of destroying slavery upon the Afro-American people and made them feel inferiority of others.

Through the analysis of two slave narratives; *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* written by Harriet Jacobs in (1861) and *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*, written by Frederick Douglass in (1845), the article discovers the role of gender and its effect upon the language of the two authors in view of the fact that the language considers an original part of the man’s life. The way black people were treated as sinners and guilty people because of their colors was a kind of punishment for them. It was Racism of white people in American society. The importance of these works is that both authors were rational in their arguments by their personal experience as a way of taking revenge from the white oppressive American society and their racism and attitude to slavery. This revenge was in different way by preferring their mental abilities rather than overwhelming emotions charged with negative reactions as the period of the American Renaissance required it. The role of literature is fundamental in confrontation and the word is stronger than the bullet in its effect.

Works of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass explore many themes. Both deal with the slavery but each one from own point of view and experience and both tried to represent certain aspects of painful slavery at that time. Douglass’s *Narrative* shows the theme of Ignorance as a tool of slavery and how the white slaveholders sustain slavery by detention slaves from reading and writing and keeping them ignorant in order to prevent them from any aspirations for freedom from slavery, and this is what Douglass embodied in her writings, as since his childhood, he had seen that slavery is something sustainable and a reality that they had to adapt to and many black people believed that slavery was a natural state of being. And, of course, as ignorant people who believed that they were unable to participate in the leadership of society, therefore, they had to step aside, giving whites full

space to lead society and that they should only remain as workers for whites. He explains how the whites concentrate on keeping their powerful upon the blacks from their birth onward by following many strategies and procedures, as they remain the slaves without any literacy even, they keep them away from basic facts such as their birth date or their paternity. This compulsory ignorance and illiteracy rob the black kids of their normal concept of personal identity.

The theme of slavery is a damaging effect on slaveholders. They used savage ways to treat the black American especially in gender effects of the families of the slave owners themselves. The power that the racist whites in American society had from the premise was that if "I am white it means I am right". They gave themselves excessive power over their slaves that created a lot of corruption in society and had detrimental effect on the slave owners' own moral health. Through his characters, Douglass was able to depict the brutal behavior of slave owners, which was represented in adultery and rape of black families and child bearing through rape and adultery. And how this behavior affected the unity and cohesion of the family and its severe psychological and social impact on these vulnerable families, as the fathers were forced to sell their children or take revenge for this worldly act by constantly punishing the children. Well, these bad behaviors affected their sexual relations with their men, because these behaviors resulted in the slave owners' neglect of their wives in their intimate relationships with each other. So these matters constituted a heavy burden on the families of slave owners themselves and a threat to the existence and continuity of these families. Typical behavior patterns of slaveholders that Douglass depicted such as Thomas Auld who distorted religious interpretations to remain blind to the sins they commit in their own home.

The theme of psychological abuse of slavery is also an all pervasive concern in these works. The physical brutality that the slaves were subjected to, which they were forced to endure, and that what came in most of the accounts of bloody images and descriptions of beatings, executions and deprivation. It is outside the man-made, heavenly and human law, and therefore it constituted a shock to the reader. And that these crimes did not stop at a certain point, they also included slaves who were not committed against them with crimes. They were stripped of their humanity Jacobs and through her novel she presents Linda, the character who embodied the resistance to this psychological war on slaves when she preferred to be a very poor farm worker rather than a pampered slave. Through this narrative and image Jacobs wanted to emphasize that the mental cruelty of slavery is just as destructive as physical torture. Linda is an example of Jacoby herself. She is an example of the many slaves who suffer from their deprivation of basic human rights and societal protection, because they are not allowed to choose and dictate who they marry and who they are not allowed to marry, and sometimes they are not allowed to marry at all. In fact, in many cases, they were forced to sleep with their masters against their will and to sell their children forcibly to people they do not know. It constituted severe psychological torment for the rupture of their families and in the same time forcing them to have sex outside the marriage relationship. Jacobs tackled these issues with great heroism and presented them to the reader that the mental and spiritual suffering is no less than the physical suffering of slaves and through Linda, Jacobs defended the truth as Linda should not bear the constant beatings nor the primitive hard work.

Most of the slave writers touched on different topics and gave multiple pictures in order to discuss the brutality that they themselves experienced, that they were eyewitnesses to, or that they heard from persecuted slaves. The psychology and the shattered, tired and frustrated mentality experienced by the slave people in American society, the ex- slave narratives were able to embody these arrogance of slave owners who were stripped of their humanity and brutally in their slaves in the ugliest forms. Like all slave writers, the works of Douglass and Jacobs embodied these atrocities with

images that touched the human conscience wherever they had a unified lofty goal of ending slavery. Jacobs and Douglass tried to prostrate their own suffering, so we see in their writings the spirit of resistance to slavery and in different ways and the idea of resistance that was born in them from their awareness of exploitation and suffering in all areas of life in which black slaves live. Through her heroine, Linda, Jacobs resisted the prevailing beliefs regarding the indifference of the black woman to her children and emphasized the role of motherhood as a force that resisted slavery and how she was able to liberate her children and protect her family while most slaves were unable to maintain their families. Jacobs, through Linda, rejected the materialistic logic of human ownership and demonstrated that maternal love exposes the economy of exchange and possession that was prevalent in that dark period of human history and was able to transform physical ability for the time from independence into one of the means of resistance to slavery. Stephanie Li says that “it is precisely through her flesh as both mother and slave woman that Harriet A. Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) claims the insurgent ground of her social identity and formulate her resistance to human bondage”.

While we see this resistance to oppression and persecution of slaves in another way in Douglass, as he embodied his experience when he was a slave and was able to fight Mr. Covey, learn and collect money to free himself from slavery after a difficult stage in his life. He lived under slavery since his childhood when he was eleven years old, he suffered a lot and was able to chart the path to freedom by understanding the white mindset of keeping slaves without education in order to maintain their power over the slaves, he overheard the conversation between Hugh and Sophia Auld to decide after that incident to educate himself and free himself from slavery. Jacobs and Douglass affirmed, through their writings that belief in the Christian religion was a major part of sustaining hope and spiritual nourishment in the struggle for freedom and for the purity of spirit among black slaves, unlike the racist whites who had white skin but possessed the fierce spirit within them. Douglass suffered from an unbearable cruel Mr. Coffey to the extent that he thought of killing him because of the harm that he had met him, which turned the face of humanity for that he decided to stand up to him and fight him. Douglass writes, “I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!” (Narrative, 1036).

The sexual exploitation and suffering was equal for both male and female slaves in that period. In the comparison between Douglass and Jacobs, we see that Douglass represented through his writings the male slaves which he embodies the slave masculinity while Jacobs represented the female slaves which embodies the slave femininity in brilliant and genius way. Having sex with female slaves in order to multiply slaves to exploit them in hard physical work, as the child was born and did not know his father and was raised as a slave until his old age and after that they free him. On the other hand, we see that Jacobs embodied the sexual oppression of female slaves, as women were forced to have sex with whites or slaves themselves in order to have children and raise them. Women were sold on the basis of which of them had the ability to have more children. They freed women from their motherhood and stripped them of their humanity. Women slaves were a machine for having sex and doing hard work as well. As Judith Butler points out, gender cannot be analyzed as a completely separate category, “It is not simply a matter of honoring the subject as a plurality of identifications, for these identifications are invariably imbricated in one another, the vehicle for one another; a gender identification can be made in order to repudiate or participate in a race identification; what counts as ‘ethnicity’ frames and eroticizes sexuality, or can itself be a sexual

marking. This implies that it is not a matter of relating race and sexuality and gender, as if they were fully separable axes of power” (Qtd. in Ishida 133-134).

Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* discusses many topics related to the suffering of slave at that time under the authority of white American society which was supported with the government authority. The work deals with many themes which reflected the effecting of the racism and savage way that the racist white people treated with the blacks as slaves in that period and their resistance and struggle to get their rights. Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass works sent their message to all the people in the world to stand beside the blacks in the USA and they could embody their big problem through their narratives like all the black intellectuals in American as they believed that is a good way to protest and reached their voice clearly.

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