



20th Century Slave Autobiography: Booker T. Washington: A Case Study

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Abstract

Slaves who wrote their narratives and created their distinct identity in various discourses is an act of bravery and revolution. The revolutionary patterns that emerged through their sufferings and the spirit of overcoming the evils of slavery system. The persistent writings both by men and women contributed to the most influential traditions not only in American literature but also in world literary order. The illiterate and barbaric slaves according to the whites, writing their experiences shaped the form and themes of some of the most celebrated and controversial writing. As a literary genre, autobiography strongly differed from fiction to the memoirs inclined towards showing realities from the voices that were the subjects of atrocities. Booker T. Washington portrays his life story in the form of autobiography and gives a detailed description about his life as a slave and how he turned a free man in his autobiography *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (1900) Washington's autobiography gives us a clear picture about the brutal system of slavery and his own emancipation from a slave to common dignified social member of American society. The autobiography as a genre is the most democratic genre as it gives the writer tremendous scope to speak to his unknown audience with complete faith and confidence. The success of Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself published in 1845 laid down the path for black slaves to put together courage and words for their future generations. This paper attempts to discuss the style, themes and critical analysis of the text and evaluate the text as a genre of literature reiterating the impact of the book on its readers and literary discourse at large.

Key words: - Slave, Slave narratives, Segregations, Racism, black, autobiography.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 18th century, the supremacy of White men had been established and was intact for a long time before and the Blacks who did not become so called civilized in the norm of White men, they were not considered as human beings at all. But as the 18th century



ended, slaves like Washington rose to the position of prominent orator and educator and thereby believed in education as a key to gain equality and identity in racial society. He has the credit of being the first free Black man to receive an honorary degree from Harvard University and received an honorary Doctorate from Dartmouth College. It is the victory of a black slave who overcame all the brutalities imposed upon him by the system. It is a story of winners and inspirational to all those who are fighting against injustice and improving the conditions of self or representing a community.

That's the reason a study of African American autobiography as a phenomenon and its uniqueness makes it a class of writing and set as autobiographical canon. The words of James Olney it is a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his life – the present looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that history has led to this present state of being. Exercising memory, in order that he may recollect and narrate, the autobiography is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper (The Slave's Narrative: 149).

Slave Narratives

The narration technique used in the text is a dramatic monologue, a single person voicing out his opinions loudly and speaking at a standpoint in his life. It reveals a dramatic situation – the drama of the protagonist's life is played before the readers, and the presence of other characters is felt through the monologue. The memories of the writer are recalled sequentially and put as a constructive plot. As Roy Pascal says, an autobiography “offers an almost unlimited opportunity for the exploration of personality - not solely of the author's but also of the people with whom he is intimately involved” (Pascal, 1960, p- 162). Slave narratives have created a unique space in literary discourse due to its revolutionary style, the experiences of suffering and the spirit of overcoming the evils of slavery system. According to online resources, the slave narrative corresponds to the larger area.

“Under the general rubric of slave narrative falls any account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave himself or herself. Slave narratives comprise one of the most influential traditions in American literature, shaping the form and themes of some of the most



celebrated and controversial writing, in both autobiography and fiction, in the history of the United States.” (nationalhumanitiescenter)

The memoirs of Harriot Jacobs, Henry Bibb, Frederick Douglass, and Washington Brooker were taught in the schools and colleges as academic texts for the African American students to motivate them of boosting their self-esteem, sense of identity and awareness of tradition, but, as Robert Louis Gates says in the foreword to Douglas’s Narrative, some of them open themselves ‘to all class of readers, from those who love an adventure story to those who wish to have rendered for them in fine emotional detail the facts of human bondage’ (Gates 1987: p-xiii). *Black Like Me* (1961) written by John Howard Griffin, the uniqueness of the autobiography is that it is written from the viewpoint of a white man who found out what it was like to live the life of a black person in the South, and who also employed the first-person narration mode in his journal. Beside this double fold narrative technique, as the impact of narratives on Jakub Ženíšek American Romanticism, which has been pointed out e.g. by Michael C. Berthold (Berthold 1993, p-135)

Booker. T. Washington portrays his life story in the form of autobiography and gives a detailed description about his life as a slave and how he turned a free man in his autobiography *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (1900) Washington’s autobiography gives us a clear picture about the brutal system of slavery and aslant emancipation from a slave to common dignified social member of American society. It was during the wave reformers of 1901; he thought of publishing his autobiography. His journey of life begins as a slave, his early life during the tumultuous civil war and his difficulties of getting out of slavery and endeavors for educating himself. According to Janet Varner Gunn, autobiography is “a mode of fictional and historical narrative that delves into time in order to take up the problem of depth” (Gunn: 42). His autobiography is a memoir coming of age which describes his die-hard efforts and exploitations as a slave. This book gives a motivation to all those who want to seek power against the odds of life, the story is optimistic and empowers the blacks. According to Mychal Massie, in his foreword to *Up from Slavery says: Up from Slavery* is the deeply moving, riveting account of a man’s life-a man who was born into slavery and



who entered freedom as bereft of education as he was in the knowledge of the proper usage of silverware” (Washington, 1900, p- vii).

Life as a slave

“Negro life may be approached from a thousand angles, with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom. Negro writers spring from a family, a clan, a class, and a nation; and the social units in which they are bound have a story, a record. Sense of theme will emerge in Negro writing when Negro writers try to fix this story about some pole of meaning, remembering as they do so that in the creative process meaning proceeds equally as much from the contemplation of the subject matter as from the hopes and apprehensions that rage in the heart of the writer.” (Wright, 1971, p- 342-343)

The autobiography opens with a vague opening where the narrator tries to mention the clueless and meaningless lives of Negro slaves and their living, Washington says: “I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. I am not quite sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth... I was born near a cross-roads post-office called Hale’s Ford and the year was 1858 or 1859.” (Washington, 1900, p-1). The opening remarks create empathy amongst the readers as the agony to be born without identity is the fate of a slave. However, the narrator feels lucky enough that his master was not as cruel as other masters. Masters were the devils for Negro and their infamous deeds have appeared in almost all autobiographies written by slaves.

Washington’s family consisted of his mother, his brother John and a sister Amanda but he was ignorant about his ancestors because of separation of family members during the time of slavery. Growing without family is the common feature of all slaves. He writes: “In the days of slavery not very much attention was given to family history and family records- that is, Black family records.” (Washington, 1900, p- 2)

Childhood

Unknown father is one of the most tragic fates of slaves, so Washington was no exception, he mentions his ignorance about his father, but he eventually learns about his father that he was a white man living in one of the nearby plantations. Black women were subject to such sexual



relations and produced children was common practice. Washington grew up with his mother who used to serve at the plantation as a cook. This job was fortunate for a slave woman who could feed her children from the kitchen but working as a cook, she used to work till late night often. Washington lived the life of slaves since his birth, and he was treated very harshly like every other slave. He was allotted some work every time and had no time for playing or speaking with his friends. The only expectation their masters had from them was to labour all the time as they were the assets of their masters. He was shoved to the toughest task of taking a bag of corn to the mill which was located on a hill and the distance was three miles from the plantation. The horse was his companion in the labour but to control the big animal was also a challenge for small Washington. Sometimes he used to lose his balance, and the corn fell off the horse and he was not strong enough to place the corn on the horse. The only option available for him was to wait for someone to help and the waiting hours in the forest were horrible minutes spent with panic, anxiety and stiffness. If he came home late then he used to receive severe scolding or whipping. Any work was assigned to any slave without any consideration of age, physical weakness or capacity, they must do it without asking any question. Utmost sincerity and commitment were expected, or they would be given the severest punishments. The toughest work was assigned to anybody and was expected to be done as per their order and time. No relaxation, no proper food or any kind of convenience was expected.

Washington was lucky enough to at least get sufficient food but his smaller friends around him were deprived of sufficient and proper food. The food was also served with the lowest quality as poorly served to animals. The slaves were not less than an animal when it came to the treatments they received. In the gloomy and pessimistic situation, one could not even think of an education for a slave. Slaves were not considered to have any intelligence and they themselves couldn't imagine daring to speak about getting any form of education. Work and hard labour were the only priorities of the slaves. Sometimes the slave kids were not allowed to go near schools, the slaves could not even dream of getting any education though they were ready to educate themselves along with the work they were compelled to do as slaves. Washington was carrying the books of his mistress to the schoolhouse, and he was



mentally impressed by looking at the children in school who were engaged in studies and in this regard, he says: "...I had the feeling that to get into schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise" (Washington, 1900, p- 7)

From slavery to segregation

Very few slaves were born with good luck who could get out of the hell of slavery, Washington's luck smiled at him when his stepfather freed him and his mother from slavery, and both went to Kanawha Valley in West Virginia to stay with the father. All these hardships of slavery came to an end in Washington's life. The end of slavery and slave life led Washington to dream of a better life with his stepfather in Virginia, but it remained only a dream until Washington gained success and carved a new life for himself. When Washington shifted to West Virginia with his family members, the salt mining industry was the main trade, and his stepfather arranged a cabin for Washington's family to live there by securing a job for him at a salt incinerator. Later he was shifted from the salt furnace to work in a coal mine which he describes as not only hard but also dangerous. His new job was no less than slavery. He was entrusted with highly dangerous work. Both his work with corn as slave and coal miner as freeman were dreadful and he was compelled to do it without any choice of his own. The coal miner's work was deadly risky and very few people could have done that job. There were no safety measures, and no one needed to work in such dangerous situations. The job was not just risky, but it was so tiring and so monotonous that a man would turn into coal forever. Concerning this Washington writes: "I have often noted that, as a rule, young boys who begin life in a coal-mine are often physically and mentally dwarfed. They soon lose ambition to do anything else than to continue as a coal miner" (Washington, 1900, p- 39).

His deep desire to change his life finally saw a success and he left the job of coal miner and joined Mrs. Ruffner's house "at a salary of \$5 per month" (Washington, 1900, p 43). With his association with school and education, Washington began to realize the significance of education and the lady's support encouraged him to learn something from educational surroundings along with his daily work. He further planned to study at Hampton, and he caught an old-fashioned stagecoach which was of lowest fare as he was out of penny. The



coach stopped in front of the hotel; he was left with no one to ask for food and lodging while the White passengers got everything arranged. He says: "This was my first experience in finding out what it's like to be black. He further planned to study at Hampton, and he caught an old-fashioned stagecoach which was of lowest fare as he was out of penny. The coach stopped in front of the hotel; he was left with no one to ask for food and lodging while the White passengers got everything arranged. He says: "This was my first experience in finding out what the colour of my skin meant" (Washington, 1900, p-47-48).

Racism and segregation

Though he worked as a slave, Washington was ignorant about the treatment towards Blacks in the white dominated society. He came across the poisonous racism when his journey to Hampton began. He was entering a new world which was full of racism and the colour of his skin mattered a lot rather than the conduct of a person. He came to know that the so-called cultured society was prejudiced with colour biased mentality and black, however talented and humanist might be, couldn't be treated in at least humanitarian way. There were humiliations and atrocities prevalent in society from ages which couldn't be wiped off. It hardly mattered how a person's behavior or status stands but if a person was Black then he was looked upon by Whites as an inferior human being and was treated inhumanely. For a White American, a civilized man is one who "wears the white man's clothes, eats the white man's food, speaks the white man's language, and professes the white man's religion." (Washington, 1900 p-98).

Jim Crow laws

Jim Crow laws was an extended version of slavery though it was legalized and officially framed to be followed by citizens of the USA. On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The declaration reads, 'all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.' But the Jim Crow laws were statutes enacted by Southern states, beginning in the late 1870's and early 1880s, that



legalized segregation between African Americans and whites. One of the important events during the nineteenth century was the emergence of the southern Jim Crow Laws.

After the official abolition of slavery by Emancipation Proclamation, the Whites enforced the special laws called Jim Crow laws, the purpose of unacceptability of blacks in their system. The whites wanted to segregate the Blacks in every sphere of life. During the reconstruction in the USA started in 1865 which continued in force till 1965 the Jim Crow laws marginalized the blacks. The racial segregation in all public places and public facilities in the Southern United States was practiced as a legal policy. With a deceptive slogan “Separate but Equal” the African Americans were segregated from the Whites and instead of treating them equally with the Whites, they were considered as inferior compared to the Whites. From his autobiography the reader understood how Jim Crow Law worked in the USA. The text mentioned that the segregation of the Blacks was such that they were not allowed to bury their dead in the graveyard which was set for the Whites. Separate ticket windows were maintained in buses, separate places were maintained in libraries, inter racial marriages between the Blacks and the Whites were prohibited forever, separation was maintained even in prisons, and separate toilet facilities were maintained for the Blacks and the Whites. All these segregations show clearly that the Whites refused to

However, despite all the hardships Washington faced in his life during the time of slavery and after its abolition, he emerged as a great human being with an identity of his own. By overcoming adversities, he became a prominent orator and educator and through his institute he appeared as a life giver to his fellow Blacks to carve a bright future for them. Remembering the kind of life, he led while travelling to Europe, the place which he considered as a place meant only for Whites he writes:

“I had been born and largely reared in the lowest depths of slavery, ignorance and poverty. In my childhood I had suffered because of a place to sleep, because of lack of food, clothing, and shelter. I had not had the privilege of sitting down at a dining table until I was quite well grown. Luxuries had always seemed to me to be something meant for white people, not for my race.” (Washington, 1900, p- 272-73)



Success and Glory

Booker. Washington emerged as a great national leader who fought against the Whites for the betterment of African Americans. His autobiography displays his growth from the position of a slave child to the status of a public speaker and a Civil rights activist. In other words, Washington rose to the position of a prominent orator and educator and thereby believed in education as a key to gain equality and identity in racial society. He has the credit of being the first free Black man to receive an honorary degree from Harvard University and received an honorary Doctorate from Darmouth College. He wanted the Blacks to give more importance to education and he also founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to encourage education among the Blacks. “They [the slave narratives] give us eyewitness accounts of the furnace of misery in the Old South that supplied raw materials for the Industrial Revolution” (Butterfield, 1974, p- 11)

But all his success and achievements were the outcome of his hard work, positive attitude and dedication, and he reached a great position because of his efforts. Similarly, like Washington another person who succeeded in his life by overcoming racism and poverty was Richard Wright who was fortunate enough to escape from slavery because of its abolition but was unfortunate in having to face the cruelties of racism and ill treatment at the hands of the Whites which will be dealt in detail by going through his autobiography *Black Boy*. If autobiographies like Frederick Douglass and Washington deal with the period of slavery, the autobiographies of Du Bois and Richard Wright chronicle the life of the Blacks and their suppression after the abolition of slavery due to racism.

Conclusion-

The slave narrative is a strong reaction and protest towards injustice that was prevalent in American society. The struggle of blacks was not against white, but it was pointed towards white evil mentality that existed in the superiority complex of whites. As Addison Gayle puts it, “They (blacks) waged not against the society but against the societal laws and mores that barred them from equal membership.” (Addison,1971, p-xviii) The autobiographical writings are intended to share personal experiences of the writer who has lived his own life



in some sort of different way. An outstanding life makes an outstanding autobiography. Slavery was an inhuman practice followed in the sixteenth to twentieth century. Slave narrative which was a product of the unscrupulous experiences of those who were the victims of the system. Black people were used as slaves and there was no end to their exploitation and brutalism. Their stories reveal the darkest chapters in the history of mankind. Slave narratives voiced out their agonies through their autobiographies and the tone of these writings is of revolt, empathy and humanity. Booker. T. Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (1900) is a slave narrative as it displays the problems and evils of the slavery system. It is the victory of a black slave who overcomes all the brutalities imposed upon him by the system. It is a story of winner and inspirational to all those who are fighting against injustice and improving the conditions of self or representing a community.

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