

## Slave Narratives in American Literature

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### Abstract

The period of slavery is one of the most horrifying periods in the history of mankind, and slave narratives are important because they are a reminder that the society should never let it repeat again. They provide an evidence that each person matters and that the fight against social injustices is still in process. The African Americans have struggled a lot in the history, and these are their accounts of all the awful events they suffered through but yet managed to raise above them, with their faith and actions. The present paper deals with the African American literature. The aim of this paper is to explore the African American literature but, more specifically, it focuses on the slave narratives, which present an important part of the African American literary tradition.

### Introduction :

Slave narrative is generally an account of the life, or a major part of the life, of a fugitive or former slave. It is either written or orally related by the slave personally. Slave narratives are one of the most influential traditions in American literature which shaped the form and themes of some of the most celebrated and controversial writing, both in fiction and in autobiography, in the history of the United States. The vast majority of American slave narratives were authored by African Americans, but African-born Muslims who wrote in Arabic, the Cuban poet Juan Francisco Manzano, and a handful of white American sailors taken captive by North African pirates also penned narratives of their enslavement during the 19th century. From 1760 to the end of the Civil War in the United States, approximately 100 autobiographies of fugitive or former slaves appeared. After slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865, at least 50 former slaves wrote or dictated book-length accounts of their lives.

The white Protestant British were probably the first settlers of America. The later arrivals differed from them in many respects. Among them were the black Africans. On one hand, they were clearly distinguishable from the others by their black skin, and on the other hand, they came involuntarily in the chains and suffered the cruelties of slavery. These African Americans struggled a lot to produce their character and culture in the hostile atmosphere of America. Thus, they established their identity and the place within the society. In spite of all the harassment and the unfair treatment directed at them, they made many important contributions to the American cultural life. The Africans were black, spoke different language, and had different culture. The striking contrast between the white Europeans and the black Africans was that the former came to America in search of greater individual opportunity, whereas the later came involuntarily, bound in chains, and served as slaves to the white.

The white European masters regarded themselves superior in every respect to the black Africans. The blacks were inferior in relationship to the white masters. It was the same relationship as that of a man's relation with his animals. The white masters treated

their slaves like their animals, as the assets of their property. John Hope writes about the history of Negro Americans that

the Egyptians enslaved whatever peoples they captured. At times they were Semitic, at times Mediterranean, and at other times they were blacks from Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the Romans and Greeks enslaved the blacks, and made them work in the houses and on fields. Mohammedan also invaded Africa, and seized a lot of Negro men and women. They enslaved, and sold them in other countries. Thus, the slave trade began. Moslems shipped them off to Arabia, Persia, or other countries. American landowners were in great need of labours for their plantations of tobacco, cotton, indigo, and sugar. Therefore, to satisfy their needs, the slaves were brought to America from Africa on a large scale. The slave trade proved itself of the great economic profits. John Hope writes that

by the middle of the fifteenth century, Europeans were selling in their home markets many African commodities, among them were nuts, fruit, olive oil, gold, and *Negro slaves* (Italics mine). Within a very few years, the slave trade became an accepted and profitable part of European commerce.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the European countries involved themselves in the export-import of the slaves. Thus, a large number of Negro men, women and children were captured and sent to Europe. The captives had to undergo a very humiliating and degrading procedure of inspection. The slaves were carried to the coast, bound in chains like animals. They were stark naked. After the close scrutiny, they were loaded on the ships like cattle. For the black slaves, white masters were the devils. They had even heard, and believed that these white devils liked to eat the Africans.

The slaveholders treated the slaves with utmost cruelty. If in any case, the slaves did not obey them, or failed to do what was expected from them, they would harshly beat them, and whip upon their naked bodies. The worst thing was that the slaveholders “found religious sanction”<sup>3</sup> for their cruelty and inhumanly behavior with the slaves. “In justification of the bloody deed,” the slaveholders would quote this passage of Scripture: “He that knoweth his master’s will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.”<sup>4</sup> So, they bet the slaves, sometimes even to death. John Hope observes, “slavery was essentially, almost exclusively, an economic institution.”<sup>5</sup> Slave trade produced larger economic profits than any other trade. It is evident from one of the events of history, when Queen Elizabeth, in 1520 came to know that one of her subjects, John Hawkins, was involved in slave trade. She lost her temper, and commented that he would have to pay a high price for dealing in human lives. However, when she saw a copy of his profit ledger, her moral indignation softened, and she herself became one of the members of the corporation.

### **Slave narratives:**

Slave narratives, either passed orally or written by the slaves themselves, are the accounts of their lives during the slavery and after or during their fugitive period. They present the most dominant and significant part of the African American literary tradition. The first narratives, that is autobiographies, started appearing between the year of 1760 and the end of the Civil War. After the year of 1865, when slavery was finally

abolished, many of the former slaves devoted their lives to writing their stories and publishing their work.<sup>6</sup> According to Vincent Carretta, the originator of the slave narratives was Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (also known as James Albert), with his “Narrative”. It was first published in London in 1772, and like most of the other slave narratives, it is an autobiography about a freedom lost and regained.<sup>7</sup> The narrative which was first to become a best-seller, and which was the first to tell about slave ships and trades, was “Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself”, written in 1789.<sup>8</sup> Before mentioning other significant African American authors, it is important to mention Harriet Beecher Stowe and her “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, from 1852. This is not a slave narrative but rather an anti-slavery novel, which was greatly influenced by other slave narratives written by that time.<sup>9</sup> and it is a fairly good overview of the time and its conditions. What was striking for me while reading it and comparing it to the slave narratives that I have read, was a new perspective on the relationships between the slaves and their slaveholders. To elaborate, in slave narratives the mentioned relationship was nonexistent. Meaning that the slaveholders, or masters, were harsh on their slaves and there was no mercy. On the other hand, in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, Arthur and Emily Shelby were good to their slaves and were always making sure that they are ok. Even though Arthur sold Tom and Eliza’s son, it is obvious that the decision was not easy. The same goes other way around; the slaves had a lot of respect for them, which we can see by Tom’s attitude when he found out that the master had sold him. He was neither angry nor hateful for his decision. As already said, slave narratives focus on the author’s “journey” towards freedom; from the chains of slavery in the South to the free life in the North. In these narratives, slavery is described with brutal images that are often hard for the reader to comprehend, so it is understandable why the resistance was necessary. After the slaves had managed to escape, freedom did not only mean reaching the North, but also appointing themselves a new name and

complete dedication to the abolishment of slavery in the United State, devotion to the anti-slavery movements. One of the narratives that supports these statements and facts, is the “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself”, written in 1845. Douglass later wrote another autobiography called “My Bondage and My Freedom”.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, there are more authors whose autobiographies greatly contributed to the African American literary tradition: Harriet Jacobs and her “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”, William Wells Brown and the “Fugitive Slave”, Elizabeth Keckley with “Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House”, Richard Wright with his 2 narratives “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and “Black Boy”, and “Up from Slavery” by Booker T. Washington, which was a best seller during the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>11</sup>

The African American literature is still a process of evolution, with its subjects being closely related to the slavery, the struggles and lives of the African Americans through history, race problems, literacy and new forms of verbal expressions. The fact that a lot of texts written have been lost somewhere along the way, presents a challenge, but new acquisitions and insights are constantly appearing. The research of certain historical periods is always a work in progress, this one especially.<sup>12</sup> First, we have the oral literature. The black people who started to retell their stories, which eventually

became reconstructions of the past. The oral literature is equally important as the written literature and should not be disregarded; it gives a sense of the culture and a new insight. What emphasized the transition from oral to written literature for the African Americans, are the slave narratives. Both are important parts of the African American heritage.<sup>13</sup> The stories which slave narratives present us, are not merely the recounts of the long lasting journey from slavery to freedom, but are also the recounts of the black people's struggles to write independently in the antebellum America. The African American literature is a literature about a movement, not only geographical, historical and political, but also physical and emotional. The early African American writings have become recognized as a genre in the Enlightenment period, but this literature has undergone a lot of changes since then. Due to historical and political circumstances, the writing, the language and style have all changed; it was not easy for black people to get published by their conditions then, when the editors and publishers were mostly white people. Nevertheless, they managed to become publicly known, and their narratives have helped in raising the public awareness of their struggles, as well as to awaken the sense of humanity between people.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The African American slaves have had a long period of agonizing battle for their freedom, and one of their weapons was their writing. They wrote their accounts on the lives in slavery, of the tortures they went through under the hands of their brutal masters, their escapes from slavery and their fight for the abolition of slavery, for human rights. The narratives of Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Harriet A. Jacobs are the best examples of this. Each of these figures represent a different perspective and point of view, and when comprised together, they give a full picture of the tortures of slavery. They stood for themselves, they were involved in politics, opened up schools for teaching black people how to read, held ranks in the government and their narratives were an encouragement for other slaves who wanted to escape but were not brave enough. They left us a sort of legacy of slavery, a determination not to let history to repeat itself. Thus, the epitome of the slave narrative shows the quest for freedom to the pursuit of literacy, thereby creating a lasting ideal of the African American hero committed to intellectual as well as physical freedom

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