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Received 08–05–2021

Accepted 10–06–2021

Printed ISSN: 2352-989X
Online ISSN: 2602-6856

*An Introduction to the American Slave
Narratives*

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ABSTRACT

The Slave Narrative is a literary genre penned by African male and female slaves who lived in America particularly during the mid 1700's till the late 1800's. This genre takes the form of an autobiography and describes the author's life in details from slavery to liberty. The slaves' accounts trigger a controversy between advocates and oppositionists and this in a way contributes in making them attractive works to be read and explored by the readers. Moreover, these tales inspire the coming of generation of African Americans to write the neo-slave narratives as a continuity of the classic bondsmen and women tales. The fundamental purpose of this article is to point out first the interconnectedness between literature and history through slavery and the different Slave Narratives. Furthermore, to shed the light on an underrated genre of literature that merits further attention and elaborations to the current audience.

Keywords: Slavery, Slave Narratives, Autobiographies, Neo-Slave Narratives, American Literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is vibrant and encloses a wide variety of concepts, discourses, and genres as well. The last two centuries witnessed the tackling of distinct themes, new genres of literature, and different literary movements. Scholars view literary studies as a mirror that reflects the reality of societies. Here comes its importance as it becomes the shelter of the African Slaves who saw in it their rescue as they started to pen their life under bondage and hence bring a new literary genre resulted by slavery issue particularly during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries in the United States. These accounts played a substantial role in studying different issues regarding the American culture and history of the African slaves starting from the first foot walked into American soil back to 1619.

The Slave Narratives are the different testimonies of former slaves who recounted their long physical and spiritual journey with slavery seeking liberty as their ultimate achievement in life. They witnessed multiple obstacles predominately by their white masters who tried to dehumanize them, using different torture methods to make them surrender. This literary genre described the way of life of the African Slaves during the period of slavery and opened different debates between the blacks and the whites about the issues of bondage and liberty.

Nevertheless, these accounts were not only seen as literary works because they encompass history to serve as historical documents by shedding light on a turning point in American history, imposing themselves to challenge the confines of bondage, to become the prominent voice of the oppressed black people, and being developed afterward to tackle the main constraints, which block the coming of generations of black Americans helping them, at the same time, to shape a unique identity. Thus, this paper will represent the interlinkage between history and literature throughout slavery and the slaves' accounts triggering simultaneously the significance of such narratives in making both historians and literary amateurs know more about the slave life, family, traditions, and most importantly, their situation within slavery. Moreover, to display how these works inspired African Americans' descendants to complete their predecessors' route with the Neo-Slave Narratives.

2. Slavery: Sparkle of the Slave Narratives:

The Slaves' tales were considered as a mirror of what was happening in the United States of America tackling the major issues caused by slavery from the sexual harassment to the callous workload. The different slave writers

and tellers needed to express their agony, hardships and suffering under this institution through their writings but this took a long time before turning into reality bringing the genre to the literary world. The subsequent lines will aim at linking the slave narratives with slavery by catching a historical glimpse about the issue as these works would never have existed without the existence of such injustice towards the African race.

2.1 Historical Context of Bondage

Distinct views over American slavery had been under discussion for many years from historians and scholars of American Studies. In the middle of pro and antislavery, it is described mainly as the most horrific issue that the world has witnessed so far, notably from black scholars who had a different, more immediate meaning for bondage (Smith, 1980, p.300). In general, it is complicated to understand how a free human being transformed into a piece of property that could quickly be sold, bought, and forced to work with no mercy. Hence, it is complicated to grasp many aspects of life in today's United States without learning about slavery's role in the lives and development of the American people (Doak, 2006, p.4).

Slavery existed from ancient times and already dwelled in Africa before being spread all over the world. Slavery was not exclusive for the dark-skinned people since Europe witnessed it as well in the image of the Roman Empire, which was a slave community where it would not have been uncommon for even a small village in Rome to maintain a few white slaves; captured from another local village or perhaps bought through a trade before the third century BC (Burks, 2008, p.8). However, by 1400 slavery had long disappeared from Europe, which motivated the Europeans to search for a supply of forced labour in the African continent. African slaves were collected by kidnapping by the free black people or as the result of local wars among Africans (Bertocchi, 2016, p.2).

By 1619, bondage shifted into the American continent, where a Dutch ship carried over 22 slaves appeared. At first, nothing was clear about their status being slaves or indentured servants since the ancient records did not clarify this point. There were probably some Africans who were considered slaves and some who were servants (Thornton, 1998, p.427). The number of Africans brought to America increased in the next thirty-five years from twenty-five to nine hundred and thirty-five persons who lived in Virginia, representing three of four percent of the whole colony population. Slaves became a necessity for the British colonists as Virginia prospered exceedingly

that the white servants cost a large amount of money, and the poor represented a real menace for the colony's ruling class. The masters used a new distinct way to hold Africans against their will, refusing to give them liberty after ending the indentured duration. The blacks occupied a distinctly inferior position. The casual manner in which they were enumerated suggests that they were perceived as a category of people quite unlike any other group (Boles, 1984, p. 13).

The African Slaves continued to live under total control by the white masters during the 17th and 18th centuries. The period witnessed different kidnaps, murders, and millions of people enslaved against their will. They were taken to America under terrible conditions, and this caused hunger and death. During this journey, around 2 million people died (Equal Justice Initiative, 2013, p.2).

Thralls were used in several laborious tasks, from working in the different cotton and tobacco plantations to household missions. To face this situation, enslaved people seized any opportunity to secure their freedom. Some fought for it through military service in the revolutionary war, whether serving for the British or the Patriots. Others benefited from gradual emancipation enacted in states like Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey (Elliot and Hughes, 2019, para.9). Nevertheless, different rebellions took place to challenge the tyranny of the slaves' oppressors. The first one was named the Stono River Rebellion in 1739. It took place in South Carolina during the harvest time when the supervisors pushed the slaves to work harder (Horton & Horton, 2006, p.46). Several other rebellions took place in the United States principally during the nineteenth century, such as the one of Denmark Vessey (1822), David Walker (1829), and Nate Turner (1831).

2.2 The Rise of the Slave Narratives

With the deterioration of the slaves' situation, they started to think about a distinct way to revolt against their masters and, at the same time, globalizing their case. There was no better way than writing their real stories, which took the form of autobiographies in order to describe the facts of the slavery system. The genre is a reflection of the slaves' lives. In addition to that, it is an illumination and an opening of a world that is important for people to discover (Crew, Goodman & Gates, 2003, p.13).

The first slaves' accounts were written under the standards of Christian identity, notably those published in the 1770s and 1780s, where Evangelical Christian groups often sponsored and oversaw their publication

(Gould, 2007, p.11). Thus, this helped to shape the language, the themes, and the basis of the slave narratives.

Even though early works considered as mostly fluid since they could be presented and read as various things simultaneously in the example of a spiritual narrative, a providential tale, and even a picaresque novel, they were less desirable and marketable in comparison to the Antebellum narratives as they did not address the wickedness of slavery and the cruelty of the masters directly. They served more for the evangelical usury to the point of being viewed as a religious genre with works such as *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa* (1798), *Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher, Written by Himself, during his Residence at Kingswood School* (1798) or even *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labors of George White, an African* (1810).

With the emergence of the antislavery movement, the narratives of enslavement took another dimension as the different writers and tellers focused more on political affairs attempting to make an end to slavery using their writings. This thing resulted in slaves' accounts with pliable rhetorical blueprints and a sharper discourse. The slave writers tried to reinterpret John Locke's ideas about human beings' natural rights (life, political equality, and ownership of the property) and linked them to their conditions, arguing about the necessity of emancipating a system that harms an entire race.

In a nutshell, the slave narrative went through several phases to secure status in the literary scope where it had had to compete in an increasingly capitalized and modern print culture; while abdicating the role of professional "writer" who merely sought money (Gould, 2007, p.26).

3. The Slave Narratives within American Literature

African American Literature was highly influenced and affected by history and the different events in the United States. There was only American Literature, a colonial one written mainly through authors born and raised in Europe in the example of John Smith, the Mayflower ship captain who introduced the first piece of writing in the continent. Nevertheless, it was not considered as actual authentic American literature since immigrants produced it. Professor Carl Bode (1995) stated, "It was not literature as we know it in the form of poetry, essay, or fiction but rather an interesting mixture of travel books and religious writings" (p.138).

The miserable condition of the African Americans under slavery institution pushed them to publish their stories in a sort of social documents collection about slavery as an exploitative, political, and economic institution that caused harm to them known by the Slave Narratives which started during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, it is not before the nineteenth century, most precisely during the Antebellum Era¹, that they became influential in the literary world. The slave narrative collections of the Work Projects Administration and Fisk University contain over 100 books, poems, and 2,200 interviews with aged ex-slaves (Crawford, 1992, p. 331).

Several reasons drove the different slaves to write their own stories. First, they wanted to challenge the image and the stereotypes of their oppressors who accused them as lazy, pathetic, and uncivilized people and proved that they could write authentically. Also, slaves were under colossal tension, and they wanted to prove their humanity in a world full of racial discrimination. Furthermore, they wrote their accounts to show their literary and psychological abilities and their spiritual freedom (Blight, 2004, para.1). Finally, enlightening the readers worldwide about their own rights. Consequently, this made them gain support for their case predominately by the abolitionist movement.

The different writings produced by the African slaves were not only about their long route with slavery seeking freedom. It is much more than that. Professor William L. Andrews (2000) considered them as "free storytelling" (p.11). The Slave Narratives became the oppressed people's voice, describing different human values regarding older adults, love, and commitment between the slaves. The stories also demonstrate the strength of the family bond (Crawford, 1992, p. 334) and, of course, a direct image of their native culture exemplified in music and folk-talks. This made the genre prevalent, and as a result, multiple works were translated into different languages, and narrators became antislavery lecturers.

The original accounts were divided into pure written and narrated stories by former slaves themselves and dictated autobiographies in case of illiteracy of the protagonist who selected an amanuensis² for writing. As these works started to achieve success and coincided with the abolitionist movement, it results in another type known as the slave novel penned by white abolitionists

¹ Derived from Latin origins and it refers to the pre-war period from the late 18th century until the onset of the American Civil War by 1861

² A person whose job is to write down what another says or to copy what another person has written (Cambridge Dictionary)

who contributed to its expansion through the white audience giving it an additional pump political standing as well.

The genre witnessed a revival in the 20th century as the debate over slavery was established again as historian U.B. Phillips asserted that old slave memories as unreliable (States Historical Society of Iowa, 1981, p.69). This created a considerably visible controversy during the Harlem Renaissance, where a new generation of black writers defends their descendants by rejecting the view of Phillips. At the same time, they attempted to display their culture and identity by resuscitating the Antebellum slave narratives, which persist with subsequent authors such as Ishmael Reed, Charles Johnson, Walter Mosley, and Nobel Prize in Literature winner Tony Morrison who is classified among the leading writers of the twentieth century's African American Literature.

4. Key Elements of the Slave Narratives

The narratives of enslavement are well known of their significant characteristics which made them according to American critic James Olney (1984) as “unique production” (p.46). Multiple questions arise in the readers’ minds about the shape of these tales as well as their nature, whether they belong to history, literature or polemical writings. The next few parts will attempt to answer the aforementioned queries.

4.1 The Form

The Slave Narratives' corpus during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries belonged to the "abolitionist literature" intending to emancipate slavery. To achieve this purpose, they need to counteract a series of derogatory and racist images to portray the actuality of African American identity from the slave's point of view (Gallego, 2000, p.141). Hence, most of the accounts took the form of an autobiography penned by male and female slaves. Nevertheless, the narrator chose to dictate his story to another one who took the process of writing in case of slave's illiteracy, such as the famous Sojourner Truth.

During the Antebellum period, various African American Narratives' were published and succeeded in bringing interest among all the readers. Not only many slaves were writing about their personal experience, but many white people also were writing about their interpretation of the slave experience (Lystar, 1995, p.21). These stories were fictional works but based from ear to mouth and considered another form of the slave narratives labelled as the slave novel which is another type of the narratives of enslavement.

In fact, there is an example that stated the difference between a slave narrative and a slave novel. Harriet Jacobs wrote a slave narrative in the style of a domestic fiction novel of the nineteenth century. Mattie Griffith attempted to write the same type of book, but the fact that she was white made it a slave novel, not a slave narrative (Lystar, 1995, p.21). Additionally, the events that occurred in the different slave narratives were proved genuine as they are the personal experiences of the slaves, whereas, in the slave novel, the events were fictional based on true stories.

4.2 Main Characteristics

The narratives of enslavement share common characteristics which shaped the genre and described the slaves' suffering and ultimate aim in life. First, the accounts' central focus is depicting the evils of bondage on the slaves along with their families in addition to their conditions and treatment by their masters. Without the system of slavery, these testimonies would never be available.

Unlike autobiography in general, these narratives focused on a typical objective reality, targeting coherence and an intended audience. They have behind them and were guided by an organized group of "sponsors," possessing at the same time of a very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, precise alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition (Olney, 1985, p.52). Second, the majority of the narratives contained a standard opening "I was born", which is a hallmark in the nineteenth century's accounts. Of course, the slave narratives' writers argue that the events narrated are factual and truthful and that they all happened to the narrator, but this is a second-stage argument; before the claim of truthfulness is the simple, existential claim: "I exist". Photographs, portraits, signatures, authenticating letters all make the same claim: "This man exists" (p.155).

Moreover, the different slave autobiographers specified only the place of birth, not the date, a description of cruel master with details of whippings, a story of a hardworking, strong, authentic African slave, accounts of auctions where the slave was transformed to a piece of property that could be easily bought and sold. Finally, a description of different kinds of food along with the work required for the thralls.

4.3 Iconic Figures of the Genre

From the early onset of the slave narratives, we can count multiple works from books, autobiographies, and poems gathered by WPA (Federal

Writers' Project) in the 1930s. Some ex-slaves writers were perceived as icons of the genre through their notable works, which contributed to the development of the slave narratives.

The first one is Olaudah Equiano, born in Nigeria in the 1740s, kidnapped and enslaved at 11 years old. He was transported to Virginia, where he was bought by an English officer named Gustavus Vassa. After making efforts to read and write and being well educated afterward, he published his well-known autobiography entitled *Interesting Narratives of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. It was published in 1789 and it became the international best-seller novel, and today it remains the most descriptive and well-known slave narrative describing not only his experience while enslaved but also his captivity (Carretta, 2005, p.365).

Frederick Douglass, the father of the slave narratives, was born as a slave in Maryland in 1818 and succeeded in escaping in 1838 after a difficult and long journey with slavery. He lived in Massachusetts, where he became a lecturer and wrote his influential work entitled *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* published in 1845. Frederick Douglass' narrative sold more than 30,000 copies in the first five years and became an international best-seller (Scott, 2017, para.5). He wrote two later versions of his autobiography entitled, respectively *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855, and *The Life and the Times of Frederick Douglass* published in 1881.

Female slaves experienced slavery distinctly from males and therefore had their distinctive way to describe the torments they endured at bondage times. Many female voices wrote their own stories intending to present the truthful events of their lives. Harriet Jacobs was one of the leading figures of the narratives of enslavement. She was born in 1813 in North Carolina. After her parents' death, her "kind" owner helped her be well educated, as she asserted multiple times in her work. She was left afterward with the relatives after the death of the woman who owned her. She suffered sexual and moral oppression from a young age by Dr Flint, the father of her young master. After years of suffering, she finally settled in Massachusetts, where she wrote her narrative *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* published in 1862 under the pen name of Linda Brent since she did not want to reveal her true identity because of her fear of the master's relatives.

5. Neo-Slave Narratives: Sequel of the Former Slaves' Tales

The slave narratives remained important as they had a hopeful tone right after the Civil War but became less optimistic during the Long Depression of the years from 1873 to 1896, a period of global economic recession (Rosenberg, 1943, p.59). By the beginning of the Great Depression in the 1930s, a new decampment towards these accounts begun. The former Slaves' autobiographies highly influenced modern African American narratives in terms of the structure, form, and different discourses delivered to the readers. Most black writers used elements of the slave narrative when publishing their first works (Andrews, 1997, p.668).

Neo-slave narratives, by definition, is a literary genre of contemporary accounts of slavery that protruded significantly following World War II, particularly flourishing in the late 1960s and 1970s (Kennon, 2017, para.1). These works expressed the psychological, social, and economic consequences of bondage because and even with the Emancipation Proclamation penned by Abraham Lincoln, the African Americans still suffered from the effects of a destructive system.

Various literary critics define the term Neo-Slave Narratives. Sofia Muñoz-Valdivieso (2012) provides insight into the formation of the term "Neo-Slave Narrative." She states, "Bernard Bell created the term' neo-slave narratives to refer to the fictions about slavery that began to appear in the US in the sixties and seventies, and he defined them as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (p.43). In other words, the authors started to depict the slave narratives experiences through distinct characters in their literary works. Ashraf Rushdy (1992) concentrates on the form of the genre while defining it. He states, "What I call "Neo-slave narratives," that is, contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (p.588)

Neo-Slave Narratives were influenced by both the civil rights and the black movement. The support of these two movements by different authors helped portray the African Americans' actual situation in Society during the sixties, which was unfair. The writers, who themselves were culturally formed during the sixties, commented via the neo-slave narrative genre on the mistakes of the New Left and Black Power Movement and those movements' hopes for the future (Rushdy, 1999, p.5).

In a novel, a fictional slave is used as a subject or narrator. In some cases, the narrator has predecessors who witnessed slavery and suffered from it.

There are two kinds of neo-slave narratives: the historical novels that are set in the antebellum South and the social realist or magical realist novels that are set in the post-reconstruction era or 20th/21st century America (Namradja, 2015, p.15). They share slavery as a common central theme and an aspect of history still suffering from its effects. The first one follows the old slave narratives most precisely in the antebellum period and varies with the narrator's viewpoint from the first to the third-person perspective—the second one shaped by the novels, which tackle the consequences of bondage on contemporary Americans. In fact, there is a third sub-genre that is authentic and has an original format and was formed right after the Civil Rights period. It recounts the family's experiments with enslavement, and it is considered a novel of remembered descendants.

Generally, the Neo-Slave narratives follow the ancient slave culture since it was substantial in forming the slaves' identity and, of course, a principal element in the narratives of enslavement during the nineteenth century. The slave culture kept the slaves from becoming enslaved in their minds, even though physically they were (Rushdy, 1997, p.533). The different authors used folk-talks, songs, and religious texts in their works. Moreover, contemporary writers merge conventional methods of storytelling with African folklore. That movement away from realism is specific for neo-slave narratives because they are not restrained by the necessity to write 'the truth' and provide the reader with proof (Vint, 2007, p.243).

Finally, gender issues play an essential role in the Neo-Slave Narratives predominately in women's works. In the classic slave narratives, women experienced a different form of slavery from men, and hence the transition from bondage to freedom was distinct as well. For males, everything started with literacy, moving to identity, and then liberty. Female slaves' three phases were as follows: family, identity, and freedom, of course. The neo-slave narratives have broken with that tradition, starting with Walker's *Jubilee*, which reinvigorated the slave narrative genre. Walker sheds light on everyday aspects of female slaves' life, which had long been disregarded (Leveeq, 2013, p.136). The Neo-slave Narratives inspire all recent black women and extol the enthralled woman's epic status by showing female slaves as motherly women rather than just needless tools for sexual desires.

6. Conclusion

The African slaves suffered a lot before shaping their own unique identity and hence imposing themselves in Society. They had to face the evils

of slavery, challenging different negative images and stereotypes of their oppressors. They have used different ways to resist and to make their voice clear all over the world. The most prominent one was writing their authentic stories, which was highly valuable for achieving what they wanted. Therefore, the slave narratives' genre starts from this point as these accounts would never exist if there was not slavery which expounds on the interconnectedness between the literary genre and the historical event.

The narratives of enslavement took the form of an autobiography where former slaves could write their own stories or dictate them to another person to write in case of illiteracy. The white abolitionists contributed to the genre with some fictional works based on true facts known as the slave novel. The different slaves' accounts gathered considerable success. Simultaneously, and inspired by their descendants' triumph, modern black writers pen another form of the genre to defend the rights and situation of the African Americans, which was far from equality. Neo-Slave Narratives are considered as continuity to the classic narratives, and the similarities between them proved to be numerous.

The genre has its primary purposes. First, evoking the thinking about the slaves' case and making it widespread in the world. Also, keeping a record of history despite the horrible things that could be found. Moreover, helping the researchers to extend their spiritual and moral imaginations, most precisely in grasping others' experiences. Finally, paying tribute to the black people and tackling humanity's issue by exploring distinct themes in the example of racism, suffering, African slave identity, and the African Americans in the whole American Society.

Overall, the different testimonies of the African slaves are significant according to different literary critics since they reflect the situation of the slaves not only in the United States but universally and here their strength becomes noticeable in changing different harsh conditions of people who wish a better future for themselves and their relatives as well. The slave narratives contributed in achieving justice between blacks and whites and paved the way for new generations to build new societies far from racism and intolerance.

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