

A Journey from Liberation to Enslavement and Back: A Critical Analysis of Solomon Northup's *12 Years A Slave*

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Abstract

Slave narratives are autobiographical accounts of former slaves. They are an integral part of African American Literature. Its origins lie in the form of abolitionist literature in the eighteenth century. It became an important genre in the pre-Civil War America. Slave narratives are regarded as unmediated account of slavery and are considered as notable historical sources on slavery and slave life. Slave narratives have gained popularity and invited attention and interest throughout Northern States particularly after Solomon Northup's return to liberty. *12 Years A Slave* is a novel written by African-American farmer and musician, Solomon Northup. The novel is based on a true story that recounts the author's life story as a free black man from the North who was kidnapped and sold by white people into slavery in the pre-Civil period. The novel is an account not of the exploitation of the oppressed by the dominant but also a saga of racial discrimination. *12 Years A Slave* is a prominent 19th century slave narrative that belongs to the African-American Literary Genres of the past 50 years: the neo-slave narrative. The researcher explores critical question representing trauma and violence and the politics of slave suicide.

Keywords: Slave Narrative, Racism, servitude, violence

Slave narratives have gained popularity and invited attention and interest throughout Northern States particularly after Solomon Northup's return to liberty. *12 Years A Slave* is a novel written by African-American farmer and musician, Solomon Northup. The novel is based on a true story that recounts the author's life story as a free black man from the North who was kidnapped and sold by white people into slavery in the pre-Civil period. The novel is an account not of the exploitation of the oppressed by the dominant but also a saga of racial discrimination.

Solomon Northup was born as a free man and lived for more than thirty years in a free state. He was trapped, kidnapped and sold into slavery and kept in bondage for

twelve long years until he was rescued in January, 1853.

Solomon Northup in his attempt to delineate his experience has portrayed a truthful picture of slavery as he experienced it. His ancestors on the paternal side were slaves in Rhode Island, one of whom, removing to the State of New York, settled at Hoosier in Rensselaer County. Along with him came Mintus Northup. Solomon Northup's father. After the death of his ancestors Mintus Northup was emancipated and free by the direction of his will.

Solomon Northup was born in July 1808 in Minerva Essex County, New York, where Mintus Northup moved after his liberation. Solomon lost his father in 1829 and his mother during his captivity. Although, Solomon Northup had a history

of slavery but his father never sought employment as a slave rather he was a man respected for his industry and integrity. Apart from providing Solomon a deserving education, his father also entitled him right of suffrage.

The trust, belief and faith that Mintus Northup taught Solomon Northup in God helped him sail through the twelve years of enslavement in the distant and depressing regions of Louisiana. All throughout his life, before being held captive, Solomon Northup was primarily engaged in labours of the farms. In his leisure hours he would pursue his passion of playing on his violin or reading books. The violin occupies, it must be said, a significant in his journey of enslavement, as it functions as a source of his consolation and amusement to his companions.

On Christmas Day, in 1829 he was married to Annie Hampton, a coloured girl. Although Anne cannot recollect his ancestral lineage, 'but the blood of three races mingles in her veins'. (24) In order to make both ends meet he decided to employ himself to support his family. He desired owning a house surrounded by a few acres of land provided his labours were rewarded.

Solomon Northup's life was complete and content with his 'demure and unabated wife' and 'his affection for his beloved children'. It was this 'completeness' that was the root cause of his sufferings in the period of enslavement.

Residing at the southern extremity of Fort Edward Village, he was employed in repairing the Champlain Canal under the supervision under the supervision of David McEachron from the savings of which he was able to purchase a pair of horses and supplements required in the business of

navigation. Later, he entered into signing contracts for transportation of large rafts of timber from Lake Champlain to Troy. It was during this span of his life that he mastered the art of rafting. Rafting, like the violin, later came to his rescue during his captivity, where he was able to render profitable service to his masters and also surprise the simple nature lumberman.

Rafting of timber also enabled him to travel to Canada where he familiarized himself with the localities, which later became an important means in his liberation. After having finished the repairing of the Champlain Canal and not desiring to remain idle, Solomon Northup entered into another contract with Meded Gunn, to cut a large quantity of wood.

Later he and wife decided on purchasing farmland and enjoy working on his field and he subsequently owned a new home in Kingsbury. The husband and wife worked in tandem. Solomon Northup took charge of the fields while Anne controlled the home affairs. Abundance in financial matters came to them from Solomon Northup's playing on the violin wherever young people assembled and Anne was employed at high wages for cooking at Sherrills Coffee House.

Their earnings enabled them to move out to Saratoga Springs. Solomon Northup was employed here to drive a hack and Anne also contributed by working in the nearby United States Hotel. At the United States Hotel Solomon came across for the first time a narrative about slavery experiences as shared by slaves themselves. It was here at this place where certain slaves would a company their masters and after having entered into conversations with Solomon Northup seek advice on liberty. The feelings of captivity and

slavery entered his mind for the first time. He writes 'I could not comprehend the justice of that law or religion which uphold or recognizes the principle of Slavery, and never once I am proud to say, did I fail to counsel anyone who came to me, to watch his opportunity and strike for freedom'. Solomon led the life of an ordinary man and had common hopes, loves and labours of an obscured coloured man'.

In 1841, on a normal day, he meets 'two gentleman of respectable appearance

whom he was introduced to as an expert violin player. They offered to pay him a handsome amount for playing violin at a place suggested by them. Solomon Northup fell into a trap laid by these two gentleman and had embarked unknowingly, on the journey to slavery.

He left without informing Anne, as he believed he would return home just as he would on any day. Solomon accompanied by the two men left for the circus, after a brief performance at a hotel. After reaching New York they coaxed him to travel to Washington. The demeanour of the gentleman was such that Solomon confided in them without reluctance all throughout the journey. Although their anxiousness did not escape Solomon's eyes.

Finally, on reaching the hotel he was shown a room on the ground floor at the bath side where he writes, 'no good angel of pity came to my bedside, bidding me to fly-no voice of mercy forewarned me in my dreams of the trails that were just at hand'. (65) Soon he was captured and put in chains and hand-cuffed while in Washington. He was robbed not only of his freedom but also of his clothes, money and free papers. Chains were fastened to a ring on the floor in a slave pen into which

the very shadow of the capitol feel, reflecting the irony.

The slave Dealers-James Burch and his partner Theophilus Freeman striped the flesh off his bones with the slave beating instrument of torture-paddle and cat-o-nine nails until he refrained from uttering the words 'I am a freeman'. They allowed him a plate of pork, bread and water to survive. His thoughts were with his family and he dreamed of them. After the slave are convinced Solomon has accepted his fate, open the yard for him, where he is gets acquainted with other slaves of his age including one- a lad of ten years old. He is grief-stricken to hear the tormenting story of Eliza and her children and how they were promised to be free people and were instead sold as slaves to Burch.

Solomon writes it was indeed ironical that he was chained and hand-cuffed as 'he walked through the streets of Washington-through the capital of a nation, whose theory of government, we are told, rests on the foundation of man's inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness!'. (49) They set sail leaving only memories behind. Their journey ended upon reaching Virginia, where these 'human chattels' were examined by slave traders before concluding a bargain. Solomon is sold to Goodin and a freeman is sold into slavery, yet again. On board to Norfolk, he exhibited his artistic skills to the slaves accompanying him and was appointed to supervise the cooking where he came to be addressed -steward by the captain. The slaves were fed twice a day at ten in the morning and five o' clock-always receiving the same kind and quantity of food and as night would approach they were securely fastened to down.

John Manning, a sailor pitied him after hearing his story. He provided him with a paper and pen and a secret place to write a letter addressed to Henry. B. Northup of Sandy Hill mentioning his circumstances of being kidnapped and pushed into slavery, a detail of his present location and the probable destination and requesting measures to rescue him from these clutches. A fellow slave is freed and his kidnappers are arrested creates in Solomon a sense of happiness and pain both. He writes 'There was a feeling of utter desolation in my heart, filling it with a despairing and regretful sense, that I had not gone down with Robert to the bottom of the sea'.

Solomon's journey into slavery begins with Theophilus Freeman, where he pleases his master and all ears with his expertise at violin. Another significant aspect that he noticed was the examining of the new slaves precisely as a jockey would examine a horse which he is about to barter or purchase. At Freeman's he is also hospitalized due to small pox and expects this should be an end to his life. During his brief stay at Freeman's he also was a witness to the brutal and painful parting of Eliza from her children Randall and Emily.

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William Ford his master whom he remembers working for and describes him as 'there was never a kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford.' (75) Here he is addressed as Platt, the name given to him by Burch. Throughout his servitude he is identified by the same name.

Towards the end of the novel Platt is confined in Bass one last time. Bass is finally able to send the letter to Platt's friend. The letter reaches Platt's friends as they showed up at the plantation searching for Platt. After answering a few questions Platt returns to his original character of Solomon again. Solomon on reaching home finally embraces his wife and children. He is also introduced to the new member in the family, his grandson named after him. Now that he was free he physically his mentaly state was still under the effect of the confinement and servitude that he experienced for twelve years.

The novel brings raises the question as to how and why should a free man have to suffer and forced into slavery for 12 long years. Solomon remains resolute and demonstrates courage thorough out the 12 years of his servitude in a country where the black man faces the challenges because the laws are written to enslave whose skin colour is not white.

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