
SURVIVAL OF THE WORD: MEDIATION OF 19TH CENTURY SLAVE EXPERIENCE IN BLACK WOMEN NARRATIVES

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Abstract: African-American literature brings together the subjects of black identity, suffering and the brutality of slavery, in writing. It establishes a convention of black subjectivity in American literature. This convention is so established that they guide the reception of slave narratives. The nineteenth-century political situation favored such writing to mediate the anti-slavery ideology, the abolitionist and the call for slave emancipation. Such a situation provided a space for the slave narratives and their concerns to be conveyed effectively to the public. This paper addresses the relationship between the mediation of slave narratives and its implied reader in constructing the African-American women subject in American history. More specifically, it examines the role of the editor and the conventions set by the editor in so far as it influences the response of the reader to these narratives. This element adds a new dimension to the inherent abolitionist motive in African-American slave narratives as it is important in the way it influences readers to perceive slavery.

Keyword: Editor, Experience, Reader, Slave Narratives.

Introduction:

Distancing the Teller, the Told and the Reader: Slave Narratives are essentially a document of Black people's voice, and a testimony of the dreadful system called slavery in America. Most of the narratives are written by the slaves, both men and women who escaped from the South to the North. The Northern abolitionists encouraged these men and women to attest their terrible experience of slavery against the system—the system that refused Blacks their freedom and literacy, and regarded them as mere commodity. Slave writings, in addition, appealed for the people who were still in bondage. However, their writing emphasizes a strong connection between freedom and literacy. The way of condemning the enslavers and the slavery system varies between black men and women. As for the men, whose narratives are assertive towards the enslaver, they believed that literacy will help them find their path to freedom. In the case of women, narratives differ with regard to subject matter. The subjects range from family, children and domestic labor to sexual abuse and freedom. As Harriet Jacobs says in her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that, "I have not written my experience in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history". The subjects discussed by the narrator are primarily the incidents they want to forget, but they narrate their experience hoping for freedom to the slaves. This difference in style can be noted not only in slave narratives but also in other genres such as essays, poetry, interviews, and stories produced by Blacks who were once slaves. On the other hand, Fredrick Douglass recollects his master saying "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave" (Douglass 44). In spite of such variety in subjects the slave narratives provided a platform allowing the blacks to testify to the cruelty of slavery and to condemn it. Therefore narrating slave experience in writing they exhibit resistance to reclaiming their lost freedom.

Though the style and the content of slave narratives are unique, obviously they are influenced by the white standards of the time. The publishers censor the narratives immensely. The ex-slaves' stories and experience were published exclusively at the discretion of the editors from the North. The censorship came in various forms. For instance, names of "both persons and places...for good reasons I [the editor] suppress them" (5). When the perpetrator of slavery and his origin of place are suppressed in their narrative, the narrators are left to produce merely their experience. This imparts a sense of innate incompleteness to the writings when they are published. Unlike their white intellectual counterparts, indeed this is what the white abolitionist and the editors expected. In many cases, the words of the writers of narratives are seen unfit to publish due to their sophisticated black intelligence. Unfortunately, the white abolitionist has the power to control the voice within the script. One may find such instances in Frederick Douglass's writing, where he states:

I was a 'graduate from the peculiar institution,' Mr. Collins used to say 'with my diploma written on my back!'... 'Let us have the facts,' said the people. So also said Friend George Foster, who always wished to pin me down to my simple narrative. 'Give us the facts,' said Collins, 'we will take care of the philosophy'... 'People won't believe you ever was a slave, Frederick, if you keep on this way' said Friend Foster. (290)

In other words, it is not the black storytelling but the white attestation of the narratives that renders it usable. The secrecy offered to the master by suppressing the details of them in the slave narratives might be a concern to not offend the white readers. At the same time white abolitionist interrupting the voice of the black writers might convey that the blacks are intellectually and morally inferior to them. If the narrative carries a multifariousness of style in language, the readers may not believe in the story.

Slave narratives as life experience is authentic in itself. The growing popularity of slave narratives and the white's manipulation of such experience for their personal benefits, prevent the writing even before it actually begins. Therefore, discarding the writers with certain privileges, or worse, fixing standards to deliver facts of slavery that is non-threatening to the white sensibilities. Furthermore, as John Sekora states in *Black Message/White Envelope*, the abolitionist used the narratives to establish "a moral geography of slavery, with accounts from each of the slave states and each of the main types of slave labor...but only so long as it supported without subverting abolitionist doctrine"(493). Therefore writers manage to manipulate the "narrative mode" so that they subvert the master rather than imitate them. In some instances, the writers shift the arguments that are predominant for the white audience, and employ the same to compel the reader to discredit slavery. Since the narratives are not written primarily for the black writers, we may safely assume that such discretions in writing have been followed for the white audience.

Black readers approached these narratives as a connecting evidence of history and their ancestors. Although during early twentieth-century the black readers were criticized for their indifferences towards the black writing. One such observation can be found in Sterling Brown's essay on "Our Literary Audience," in which he criticizes the black readers as who "confute" (Brown 384) the black writings. Therefore the black indeed remained a reader of black writings irrespective of, them being considered as the intended audience. The nineteenth-century slave narratives, written by women in particular, sought to put an end to the humiliation by speaking against it.

Such narration by women carries much weight in the range of observations within the societal space, to be appropriate to the purpose of discrediting slavery. Besides, the best way to do it is to convince the reader about the truth that appeals to their moral consciousness. The radical abolitionist rhetoric of women would follow. As Jacobs says, "I had not lived fourteen years in slavery for nothing. I had felt, seen, and heard enough, to read the characters, and question the motives, of those around me. The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered. Alas, for me!" (21). The argument on the moral perspective brought by the women slave narratives improved the ways in which their stories are told. It helped them depict the system of slavery as the most corrupt and inhuman. Harriet Jacobs states this point with clarity and distress when she says "Only by experience can anyone realise how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations"(4). Here Jacobs's metaphors convey the horrendous character of the institution and the experience it unleashes upon human subject. She also stresses the fact that the horror can be comprehended only in experiencing it. She conveys beyond doubt the inadequacy of the external perspective in understanding slavery. Slavery as a system has committed crime of commodifying blacks. The discussions on morality also portray the effects of slavery on the masters and the slaves, resulting in both getting accustomed to the system. That is, slavery as a system conditioned the white master with superiority complex that made them take the slaves for granted inflicting punishments. While for the slaves, the inferiority was situational which at times of extreme experience turns into violence.

Monetizing Literacy and Readership: As discussed earlier publishers/ editor played a major role in documenting the voices of the ex- slaves. These voices are primarily edited in order to not offend white sentiments. It was also done to maintain a standard in the language of the narrators. We have noted this in some of the above arguments. In order to meet the literary expectations and to make the writing compatible with the social attitudes of the reader, the subject of the slave narratives is chosen in advance. For example, when the blacks are denied education and basic rights, and are treated as commodities, sufferings, survival, and freedom are the subjects they choose to convey their slave experience. Therefore, we can say that slave

narratives generated stories of the survivors of slavery but not the rebellions like Nat Turner. This difference can be noted across the black writings. The publishers also incorporate stories of the slaves based on the facts they present in it. The editor's testimony authenticates the facts, and with certain liberty suppresses and, in the process of she familiarizes the reader. L. Maria Child, the editor of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, states:

The author of the following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspires me with confidence This fact is sufficient, without further credentials for her character. I believe those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity, though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction. (Jacobs 5)

This consistent effort of persuading the readers towards the facts of the narrative might have behind it an intention to avoid any challenges to the validity of the abolitionist movement. The editor frequently interrupts the narrative irrespective of the consent of the narrator by claiming that "the changes [I] made have been mainly for the purpose of condensation and orderly arrangement" (Jacobs 5). The narrative no more carries the voice of the narrator than that of the editor. The editor's voice overrules that of the narrator. Ironically, these narratives are mostly written by the ex-slaves, both men and women, covering their thoughts on the abolition of slavery without any assistance from the white abolitionist editor. Many of the literate ex-slaves have a straightforward impression about slavery, which they are ready to publish, without any testimonies from the editor since the facts can be verified through government documents, newspapers, and other sources. Since the possibilities of consuming slave narratives by the readers are scarce without the testimonies, the editors almost always look forward to these narratives. Meanwhile there are possibilities that these slave narratives could have been told and re-told by the narrators in many forms before being put into writing. Since the role of the editor in publishing the narratives is an attempt to propagate the abolitionist movement, the monetary benefits of such production is not a chief issue in African-American studies.

Ulrich B. Phillips in his well-known book *Life and Labour in the Old South*, asserts that the authenticity of slave narratives centered on the editor's testimony. He says "ex-slave narratives in general... were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful" (219). As John Blassingame points out, the dictation of the editors creates the "fundamental problem confronting anyone interested in studying black views of bondage" since "the slaves had few opportunities to tell what it meant to be a chattel" (Blassingame 474). Given the nineteenth-century political situation, these editing might have elicited and escalated a positive response, while in the late twentieth-century the writings are precisely rejected by the historians for lack of existing evidence. C. Vann Woodward, in the article "History from Slave Source," notes the neglect of the editor who controls the narrative. In women's slave narratives "[t]he neglect is all the more striking because it continued almost uninterrupted through the next decade and thus through the peak of activity in black history as well as the wave of productivity in the history of slavery" (471). Due to this deducing facts from the slave narratives becomes difficult in spite of attempts made by the critics. The conventions of the slave narratives are presented to the reader, which to an extent, restricted the narrative movement. Future readers might find some event to be invented or consider them lies owing to the intervention of editors. But the majority of black narratives are written by exceptional men and women who survived slavery. Therefore in order to understand the narratives the readers are forced to engage the overruling, overbearing editor and his or her interventions in the slave writings. That is, when the language used in the narrative brings disbelief on the part of the reader, it must be used as a way to engage with the writer rather than rejecting the credibility of his or her narrative.

Testimony as Evidence: The following quote from Annie L. Burton's *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days*: "what will the nigger do if they are free? Why, they will starve if we don't keep them." This intuitive observation captures the essence of the role of testimonies in slave narratives. Slave narratives not only testify the slaves' experience but also the slaveholder's. For the master—the slave holder—what the slaves do is not always dependent on their assumptions. They assume that the success of black is to escape to north adopting themselves to the standards fixed by the whites. And it is mediated through the context of slave narratives. The testimonies of the editor—who is white in most of the cases - provide a space for the narrators to portray the brutality of slavery. Not all women slave narratives were written after achieving freedom. This means that most of them needed the editor's testimony. The fact that these narratives were in need of such testimonies and editorial notes captures the common mind set of the readers as well. The testimony, by filtering experience what to say and what not to say, reveals how the narratives have been constructed. It also becomes a mediator

which helps the white reader to understand the discourse of slavery. Apart from holding influence on the reader, testimony as a medium also established the identity of a woman slave to the white audience. It is the dominance of the white ideologies on abolition, and the suffering which decides and standardizes slave narratives. These ideologies also determine the discourse surrounding slavery, and, more importantly, response of the reader. The structure of writing made the reader believe that the slaves, both women and men, cannot think independently. When such an idea as perpetuated itself through American history for centuries it becomes difficult for the readers to accept change. Every reader irrespective of their inclination towards slavery carries such notions while reading slave narratives. It is the testimony that provides the affirmation of the reliability of slave narratives.

The challenge for African-American women was to imagine writing both as a tool for women's self-empowerment and as an affirmation of sexual liberty from raced and gendered forms of terror and oppression. The words that the narrators have documented in their narrative humanize them and make the reader to sympathize with the injustice which is inflicted upon them. In opposition to the conventions created by the editors and readers that restrict the writing space, slave narratives managed to mediate their experience in humanizing the women along with white women as well as men, both white and black.

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