



A REVIEW ON SLAVE NARRATIVES

G. M. MADHAVI

Research Scholar
Reg.No: PP. ENG.0022
Department of English
Rayalaseema University
Kurnool (AP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Slave Narrative is a genre of literature that was written mostly between the mid 1700s and the late 1800s. Slave narratives are mostly autobiographical. From 1760 to the end of the Civil War; 1861-65 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 Slave Narratives started were about the hardships of fugitive or freed slaves in a time of racial prejudice. They further developed into retrospective fictional novels. This paper makes an attempt to give a brief account on the history of Slave Narratives from 1700s to 1800s and helps the scholars of the area to gain the basic knowledge.

Key Words: *Slave narrative- genre- African American Literature - autobiographical- hardships of slavery- fictional novels.*

A type of literary work that is made up of the written accounts of enslaved Africans is called Slave Narrative. Slave Narrative is a genre of literature that was written mostly between the mid 1700s and the late 1800s.

Slave narratives are mostly autobiographical. The narratives were either written by the slaves themselves, or dictated by them to someone else who wrote their accounts. Some were even passed orally. That is how the oral tradition came into existence. These narratives were the accounts of their horrible lives as slaves. Slaves were captured, sold, and humiliated. Slave



narratives present the most dominant and significant part of the African American literary tradition.

Though African-born Muslims, the Cuban poet and white American sailors taken captive by North African pirates penned narratives of their enslavement during the 19th century, the vast majority of American slave narratives were authored by African Americans.

From 1760 to the end of the Civil War; 1861-65 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. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the WPA Federal Writers' Project gathered oral personal histories from 2,500 former slaves, whose testimony eventually filled 40 volumes.

WPA Slave Narratives are the interviews conducted with ex-slaves from 1936 through 1938 by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). WPA Federal Writers' Project is a program established in the United States in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) as a of the New Deal struggle against the Great Depression. It provided jobs for unemployed writers, editors, and research workers.

Slave Narratives

The slave narratives started appearing between the year of 1760 and the end of the Civil War were about the lives of fugitive or freed slaves in a time of racial prejudice. They further developed into retrospective fictional novels. The freed slaves are called historians as they talk from their memories since memory and history come together. The narratives also give an account on historical events such as the American Civil War and the Underground Railroad.

Many readers on both sides of the Atlantic, from Boston to London had read best narratives towards the end of 1700s. With the rise of the abolition movement in the early 19th century demanded harsh realities of slavery in the United States. In response, many narratives claimed thousands of readers in England as well as the United States.

Ukawsaw Gronniosaw

According to Vincent Carretta, the originator of the slave narratives was Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, with his *A Narrative of the Most remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As related by himself*. Ukawsaw



Gronniosaw is also known as James Albert. 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. It was the first Slave narrative in the English language.

Olaudah Equiano

The first autobiographical slave narrative *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African* was written by Olaudah Equiano in 1789. In this narrative, Equiano relays his tortured plight from being captured in Africa, to his freedom and economic success as a British citizen in Europe. The narrative includes details of his boyhood in West Africa, his travelling in disgusting, inhuman conditions across the Middle Passage. Middle Passage is the name of the slave route across the Atlantic Ocean. Olaudah Equiano also tells about his treatment at the hands of various slave masters and how he eventually gained his freedom, travelled to England, and achieved notoriety there.

The two volume narrative was the first to become an international best-seller, and was the first to introduce slave ships and trades through the innocent perspective of an African captive. It stirred anti-slavery sentiments in Britain, where Olaudah Equiano spent the majority of his life as a free man.

Indeed, he died in London in 1797, while slavery continued without any clear signs of decline in the newly established United States.

Frederick Douglass

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 support these statements and facts is the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, written in 1845 sold thousands of copies. In the period immediately before the Civil War, historians estimate that the book may have sold nearly 30,000 copies. It is often considered the epitome of the slave narrative, links 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.

Revising and expanding his original life story, Frederick Douglass wrote *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, partly to recount his continuing struggle for freedom and independence against Northern racism.



William Wells Brown

In 1847, William Wells Brown published his memoir, the *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself*, which became a bestseller across the United States, second only to Frederick Douglass' slave narrative memoir.

Henry Walton Bibb

Henry Walton Bibb was an American author and abolitionist who was born a slave. In 1849-50 he published his autobiography *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, which became one of the best known slave narratives of the antebellum years.

Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth in 1850 published an account of her life, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*. She was an African American abolitionist and women's rights activist.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

In the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, American slave narratives contributed to the mounting national debate over slavery. The most widely read and hotly disputed American novel of the 19th century, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), was deeply influenced by its author's reading of slave narratives, to which she owed many graphic incidents and the models for some of her most memorable characters.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is not a slave narrative but rather an anti-slavery novel, which was greatly influenced by other slave narratives written by that time and it is a fairly good overview of the time and its conditions. Unlike other slave narratives, a new perspective in the relationships between the slaves and their masters is seen in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On contrary to the common belief that slaveholders, or masters, were harsh on their slaves and there was no mercy, Arthur and Emily Shelby in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were good to their slaves and were always ensure 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.

Solomon Northup



Solomon Northup was an American abolitionist. In his first year of freedom, Northup wrote and published a memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave* in 1853.

William and Ellen Craft

William and Ellen Craft were fugitives and abolitionists. Their daring escape was widely publicized, making them among the most famous of fugitive slaves. They published a written account, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; Or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery in 1860*. The narrative is one of the most compelling of the many slave narratives published before the American Civil War. Their book reached wide audiences in Great Britain and the United States.

Harriet Jacobs

By the time the Civil War began, in 1861 Harriet Jacobs, the first African American female slave authored her own narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. She was forced to hide for seven years in a cramped, lightless attic to avoid her greedy owner's revenge. The narrative depicts her resistance to her master's sexual exploitation and her ultimate achievement of freedom for herself and her two children.

The author Harriet Jacobs had to publish it under a pseudonym in order to write about the gender-based violence she experienced as a slave. The text was published originally in serial form in a New York Newspaper.

A few autobiographies after the abolition of slavery

After the abolition of slavery in 1865, former slaves continued to publish their autobiographies, often to show how the rigours of slavery had prepared them for full participation in the post-Civil War social and economic order.

Elizabeth Keckley

Elizabeth Keckley an African American businesswoman is an author of *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* published in 1868. It chronicled her successful rise from enslavement in Virginia and Missouri to employment as the fashionable dress maker and confidante of Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of Abraham Lincoln.

Booker T. Washington



The best-selling slave narrative of the late 19th and the early 20th century was Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* published in 1901. It is a classic American success story that extolled African American progress and interracial cooperation since the end of slavery in 1865.

A few more narratives to consider

Notable modern African American autobiographies, such as **Richard Wright's** *Black Boy* published in 1945 and **Alex Haley's** *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* published in 1965, as well as famous novels, such as **William Styron's** *The Confessions of Nat Turner* published in 1967, **Ernest J. Gaines's** *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* published in 1971 and **Toni Morrison's** *Beloved* in 1987, bear the imprint of the slave narrative, particularly in probing the origins of psychological as well as social oppression and in their searching critique of the meaning of freedom for 20th century black and white Americans alike. *The Bondswoman's Narrative* published in 2002 but was written in the mid-1850s, apparently by an African American woman who signed herself **Hannah Crafts**. It is claimed to be the autobiography of a fugitive slave from North Carolina. This unique manuscript, however, is also highly fictionalized, making it an important contribution to the novelization of the slave narrative signalled by the complex authorial voice in Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* and the extensive use of dialogue in Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

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