



Literature as History in *Twelve Years a Slave* and its Movie Adaptation

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine literature as history emphasizing the role of fiction. Some fictions are actual accounts of events in history, and some are reflection of events. In fact, literature and history cannot be separated. The point is that there is no mere and pure history which is totally true and shows us the reality, because the pens writing history are subjective. So many factors could change the history of such as people. During the history, power was a factor to control many things in which one of them is history. On the other hand, literature and literary texts even are not independent, and they are related to history. But how? The writers who produced literary texts in different genres such as poem, novel, or drama were living in a determined period, and in that period some events were dominant. In other words, literary texts were written in a context that definitely affected writers' mind. *Twelve Years a Slave* is a clear example of literature as history, for it tried to demonstrate history within literary language. This research investigates the inseparability of literature and history.

Keywords: History, Literature, Movie Adaptation, Black History, Slave Narrative

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: Wednesday, January 11, 2020

Accepted: Sunday, May 17, 2020

Published: Tuesday, June 16, 2020

Available Online: Tuesday, June 9, 2020

DOI: 10.22049/jalda.2020.26735.1162

Online ISSN: 2383-2460; Print ISSN:2383-591x

Introduction

This paper examines literature as history emphasizing the role of fiction (literature), as "petit recits" (Lyotard, 1979, p. 60) or "small histories". Also it tries to depict the interplay between fiction and history in *Twelve Years a Slave* and its movie adaptation. History cannot be construed as a collection of facts about actual events. Today the literary scholars unanimously acclaim that the narratives which constitute "History," with a capital "H," are interpretations of events from the vantage point of those who have the power and influence to write History. All narratives, as Foucault (1972) reminds us, are in one way or another discourses of power. Therefore, if history is at service of the dominant power, literature can be an impeccable mean to proclaim unheard voices. As White (1987) aptly argues, history can claim neither "innocence" nor objectivity, because as a discourse it has lost its "truth value" since it imposes a false teleology, and false consciousness.

It is in works of fiction and literature that much of the occluded history of marginalized communities has been recorded. *Twelve Years a Slave* is a story told from the inside of the marginalized black slave community.

Twelve Years a Slave is the touching actual story of Solomon Northup, who was a free black living in New York being lured south, kidnapped, and sold into slavery in Washington in 1841, and was rescued in 1853, from a cotton plantation in Louisiana. His book was published in 1853. He recounts his unbelievable experiences of slavery with a meticulous scrutiny. Notwithstanding that the novel focuses on the story of Solomon, as an individual it also represents the sufferings and survival of the many. His narrative implicitly portrays systemically the dehumanizing slavery institutions in American history. The rich descriptions of Solomon Northup explore and historicize slavery and provide a testimony to the lives and experiences of enslaved men, women, and children from the era of the slave trade and plantation slavery.

A brief account on the historical context of that period and background of slavery seems necessary. In this period some events happened that are significant in ending slavery. From the early 17th century, the Europeans launched a profitable dirty business of slave trade and brought hundreds of thousands from Africa to the United States. More than 250000 slaves were landed in America during American slave trade. Most of them were supposed to work on cotton plantations. Soon the population of slaves nearly doubled between 1810 and 1830 (Walvin, 1996). They were mostly conveyed to south of America because the south had better conditions in growing cotton and had more rural parts than the north. In 1808 the Congress banned any trade of slave and no slave was allowed to come to America, so the controlling of the slave population and preventions of runaways was reinforced

(Walter, 1999). The other important event was, passing the rule of Fugitive Slave Acts in two different periods.

The Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1793 and allowed slave owners to capture runaway slaves all around of America. As is said before, slavery was more common in the south but the north was more moderate, that is why runaway slaves had chosen north to flee. The congress passed this rule to return runaway slaves, and those who interfered in capture of slaves, should pay high penalties. Nobody had the right to harbor escaped slaves or help them to escape. The rule got even stricter by passing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and added stricter rules to the previous ones. Daniel Sharfstein (2011) claims that these rules let "the federal government in the service of the slave owners pursuing their runaways" (p. 57). There was a reason to pass these Fugitive Slave Acts. Free African Americans, freed slaves, and abolitionist worked on Underground Railroad. They were not actual railroads but they were some underground ways to hide or transport slaves to the free states. So the congress passed these rules to prevent escape of slaves.

As slavery got stricter, its extinction became closer. From the beginning of the slavery, there had been objections to it. Perhaps many individuals could understand the cruel nature of slavery, but they could not stand up for a fight against it, due to the possible consequences. From the heart of this dissatisfaction the movement of abolitionism gradually started in mid-eighteenth century and finally it found its way in 1865 by passing of the Thirteenth Amendment Act, which led to abolishment of the slavery first in the northern states, then after some abhorring resistance from the slave owner side, it was put to practice in the south too. Religious and moral ideas also played a great rule in starting the movement and many intellectuals and politicians contributed to it by criticizing slavery (Walvin, 1996). William Lloyd Garrison was one the whites who established the first abolitionist newspaper in 1831 and published several papers to help end the slavery. He was a public speaker and was trying to convince more people to end the slavery by his motivating speeches. Some other proponents appeared in this period as Frederick Douglass (1845) who was one of the important leaders of the 1800s. In addition to his speeches, he published a newspaper named *North Star*.

By increasing abolitionism's power, many groups and organizations came to ground and prepared the conditions to end the slavery. In the counter side, American Colonization Society was found in 1817, whose purpose was to transfer the free African-Americans to their territory, Africa, in a city named Liberia in order to start a new colony. In Latin, Liberia means "place for freedom". But this solution did not solve the serious problems because just few people agreed to go to Africa so the population of the slaves did not decrease that much. Despite efforts of abolitionists, many Americans opposed ending the slavery, because they claimed that ending slavery would damage their properties, economy and culture.

Actually the third decade of 19th century was a crucial period in black history because serious events and revolts occurred in this period. In 1831, Nat Turner led an effective and sustained slave rebellion in the U.S. The same year American Anti-Slavery Society was founded by William Lloyd Garrison. The next significant event was Civil War which started in 1861 and ended in 1864. In the gap between 1830 till 1860 (the year before Civil War) many characters play important roles, as Harriet E. Wilson, John Mercer Langston and many others who attempted to end slavery by their pens or speeches.

In 1861, Civil war started between the Northern and Southern states in U.S. over slavery matters. It cost a lot and dear for the Americans because 620,000 soldiers were killed from both sides and many regions in the South left in ruin. Southern states wanted to spread slavery towards the west; however, the northern states wanted to end the slavery and gain access to cheap work force of the black. The election of Abraham Lincoln as a president was another cause to flame the civil war's fire. When he was elected, the election was not held in most of the southern states. He was against the slavery and was considered as a threat to end the slavery in The U.S. Therefore, the south felt to be in danger because the end of slave system was so close. On the other hand by industrialization of the north, there was no need for slaves, because both white and black people were labor forces, though the South did not want to lose the cheapest workforce. Finally, the north won the war in 1865 and slavery officially ended on December 6, 1865 by passing the Thirteenth Amendment in U.S.

From heart of this disturbed era some new literary genres appeared which were paying to slave life. Abolitionist literature was one of them which appeared in literature during 18th and 19th century. Its main concern was immorality of slavery, showing the horrors of the slave trade and dehumanizing aspects of slavery. Slave narrative was another branch of this broad field. Du Cille (1993) proclaims that "nor can we continue to claim an African American literary tradition as an island, entire unto itself, separate from and uninfluenced by so-called white cultural constructs and western literary conventions" (p. 9). When a person has black skin, it means s(he) carries black history and slave history within herself/himself. In fact, their skin color made them to be marked and distinct because the whites were in majority.

Almost all books on the Negroes' past are written by the whites or are under the influence of the whites' mentality. Sam Worley (1997) is right to believe "those narratives which rely on a white amanuenses are inherently less interesting than those which do not" (p. 243).

So narrating the past from a black slave's point of view is unique in more than one way. The account of slavery in *Twelve Years a Slave* is completely unique, for it

is written from a slave standpoint. Because as Margaret Atwood (2000), in *The Blind Assassin* expresses "But unshed tears can turn you rancid. So can memory. So can biting your tongue" (p. 46). Solomon Northup's story (1853) in *Twelve Years a Slave* is the story of a bitten tongue. Let's look at some bitter memories of Solomon;

Still he plied the lash without stint upon my poor body, until it seemed that the lacerated flesh was stripped from my bones at every stroke. A man with a particle of mercy in his soul would not have beaten even a dog so cruelly. (p. 37)

His narrative is real and unexaggerated. In black history and their written documents, most of the texts are written by runaway blacks who violated Fugitive Slave Laws. Unlike them, Solomon was not a runaway, but he was freed legally. There have been some other narratives from a black person's point of view like Frederick Douglass. In his three autobiographies including *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he described his life as a slave and his freedom, and paid to different subjects. One of his main differences with Solomon Northup is that Douglass was born a slave but Northup was a free man, so there should be some differences in their point of view to the surrounding world. It is proved that whatever Northup said in his novel, had the root in the reality, and the names, places and dates are all verified, as well as the freedom documents of Solomon Northup. To historians, the everyday slave life with these much details is so important. To most of historians, slave narratives are unreliable pieces which never show the reality but Phillips (1929) opens a new area and claims that "slavery cannot be honestly described by anyone but the slaves" (p. 430). He describes Solomon Northup and his novel as below:

Solomon Northup went as a Negro kidnapped into slavery and wrote a vivid account of plantation life from the underside. But ex-slave narratives in general, and those of Charles Ball, Henry Box Brown and Father Henson in particular, were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful. (p. 219)

Solomon Northup (1853) himself described his novel, *Twelve Years a Slave*, as below:

My narrative is at an end. I have no comments to make upon the subject of Slavery. Those who read this book may form their own opinions of the "peculiar institution." What it may be in other States, I do not profess to know; what it is in the region of Red River, is truly and faithfully delineated in these pages. This is no fiction, no exaggeration ... I doubt not hundreds have been as unfortunate as myself; that hundreds of free citizens have been kidnapped and sold into slavery, and are at this moment wearing out their lives on plantations in Texas and Louisiana. (p. 321)

The novel is a fact-based one dealing with slavery system based on a valid content and providing a reliable historical reference for them. It not only teaches history, but also shows the triumph of a man against brutality. In another part of the novel, Solomon Northup (1853) claims:

I can speak of Slavery only so far as it came under my own observation—only so far as I have known and experienced it in my own person. My object is, to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, and leaving it for the others to determine, whether even the pages of fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or a severer bondage. (p. 18)

The novel is adapted to a movie with the same title in 2013 by Steve McQueen. Both the novel and its movie adaptation make people feel the history and hypocritical face of the social institutions, like institution of religion. Frederick Douglass (1845) turns to religion and religious slaveholders as below:

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. (p. 246)

As mentioned *Twelve Years a Slave* is a realistic fiction, which provides to its narrator, Solomon Northup (1853), an excellent space to criticize the ruling power without resorting to degrading language; “I could not comprehend the justice of that law, or that religion, which upholds or recognizes the principle of slavery;” (p. 78). Like other realist fiction, its characters are not larger than life, there problems and issues are the ones happen in the real life and are palpable and tangible to the readers. Both novel and its movie adaptation illustrate brutal slavery which is undeniable, shamble, and unforgettable part of American history, while the formal history certainty ignored to talk about it.

The movie too, plays an important role in depicting history in its turn. The media of a novel is different from a movie, it could best portray the real life. Historical movies can be based on actual historical events or can be a twisted mixture of facts and fiction. But the case of *Twelve Years a Slave* is unique, because it is based on a written, and somehow documentary text to which the movie is

faithful in a way that its dialogs follows exactly the original text of the novel. The movie also is unique due to its depiction of slavery situation and life with no Hollywoodian exaggerations.

The limitation of literature as history wades away when it is based on facts. Literature and history are not separated realms but they are somehow complementary to each other. As Bautista (1988) states "literary realities are inextricably linked with historical realities so that consciously or unconsciously, the writer transforms history in his given literary mode and history, in turn transforms his artistic perspective" (p. 195). A literary text is the reflection of its milieu in which some events are highlighted, so a writer can play the role of a historian in depicting the historical events but in a literary form.

Then *Twelve Years a Slave* and its movie adaptation work projecting history without any remarkable bias. They let the people see and feel the history rather than judging history since the things become tangible for the readers and the audiences. Both media represent slavery impeccably; from the very beginning, the readers are faced with naked reality in context of the novel and emotionally feel the agonies and bitter pains of the characters of the novel. Starting with slave trade in New Orleans, the writer and director takes the readers and audiences to the chattel slavery realm where slaves are equated metaphysically with property. Slaves are naked by force so that the buyer checks their body vigor and physical strength.

Despite his fidelity to the greater abolitionist narrative, Solomon illuminates his experiences and yearnings in the most authentic way possible. His descriptions of the plights of bondage and sufferings, is the story of thousands of those enslaved in the American south. Then he takes the readers to the doomed fate of the slaves. In fact, the reader by the end of the novel gets a panoramic picture of slavery system in that period. The movie too tries to be faithful to the novel and show the pictorial truth. It takes the audiences to the heart of brutality and slavery in a two-hour movie.

In depicting the mass' mentalities the both media are successful. The masses are always subject to the imposed ideas and ideologies. There was an ideology behind slavery system. As Ben Khalifa (2017) argues "Racism is not only the mere idea of dividing a given society into different groups based on their colors, ethnicities and viz., yet it is a whole system of thinking about the self and the other" (p. 24). In this vain, Northup (1853) narrates in the novel that "it is not the fault of the slaveholders that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives" (p. 135). Most of the white did not let themselves think about irrationality of slavery life, and on the other hand, the black did not let themselves think of any objection or opposition for a long time. These matters happened, because there was a big power upon people and that was the dominant ideology. During slavery period many whites and blacks were victims of these ideologies. Whites were victims

because they were thinking slavery was something came to them generation by generation by their fathers and they should keep it. On the other hand, blacks were victims too, because they were thinking that it was their fate to be a slave and there was no way but to surrender to the white. White racism and discrimination made the slavery system last so long. Let's read Solomon Northup (1853) recounts on his mistress indicating the alienating force of dominant ideology:

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. (p. 156)

Humans are free creatures and have the power to decide about their life, but the slave system reversed it completely. Slaves even had no power to continue their life with their own names; alienation and lose of identity was inevitable result of rigid slavery system. In page 137 of the book, *Twelve Years a Slave*, we read "Really, it was difficult to determine which I had most reason to fear—dogs, alligators or men!" When money talks loader Solomon (1853) is right to say "Alas! I had not then learned the measure of "man's inhumanity to man," nor to what limitless extent of wickedness he will go for the love of gain" (p. 18).

There are many examples of cruelty of man to man through the history. All humans are equal and there should not be any difference between them. There is a significant conversation between the two whites, master Epps and Bass, in the novel. The latter one was a middle-aged Canadian carpenter who was working for Epps to build a new small house. He was the one for whom Northup owed his life, because he sent Northup's letters to the post office and had an important role in his freedom. He was a man with a light heart and that was why Northup ventured to tell his history and his evil fate to Bass. Northup had told his story to some others, too but they brought him more lashes not freedom. The discussion between Epps and Bass is on slavery and the conditions of slavery:

I tell you what it is Epps," said Bass, "it's all wrong—all wrong, sir—there's no justice no righteousness in it. I wouldn't own a slave if I was rich

as Croesus, which I am not, as is perfectly well understood, more particularly among my creditors. There's another humbug—the credit system—humbug, sir; no credit- no debt. Credit leads a man into temptation. Cash down is the only thing that will deliver him from evil. But this question of Slavery; what right have you to your niggers when you come down to the point?

"What right!" said Epps, laughing; "why, I bought 'em, and paid for 'em."

Of course you did; the law says you have the right to hold a nigger, but begging the law's pardon, it lies. Yes, Epps, when the law says that it's a liar, and the truth is not in it. Is everything right because the law allows it? Suppose they'd pass a law taking away your liberty and making you a slave? (p. 266)

Bass, a simple laborer questions the basic of the slavery system, and on the opposite side, Epps has no reasonable answer to his questions. All he could say was that slaves are his property and he had paid for them to work for him for sure. In fact, slaves were merely tools to be at service of the white. Bass continued his debate with Epps which their discussion went up and gist of his ideas were summarized in a paragraph:

These niggers are human beings. If they don't know as much as their masters, whose fault is it? They are not allowed to know anything. You have books and papers, and can go where you please, and gather intelligence in a thousand ways. But your slaves have no privileges. You'd whip one of them if caught reading a book. They are held in bondage, generation after generation, deprived of mental improvement, and who can expect them to possess much knowledge? They are not brought down to a level with the brute creation, you slaveholders will never be blamed for it. If they are baboons, or stand no higher in the scale of intelligence than such animals, you and men like you will have to answer for it. (p. 207)

The history is full of man's horrific cruelty to his fellow man. As Toni Morrison in one of her interviews expounds, the history of slavery and racism are inextricably intertwined, but slavery as an institution in Great Britain and America was the direct result of the capitalist development needed to provide the wealth to fund the industrial revolution. And she adds:

Modern life begins with slavery... Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. It made everything in world war two possible. It made world war one necessary. Racism is the word that we use to encompass all this. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 221)

Conclusion

History is told and created by power. Power lets some parts of history untold or ignored and literature is a compensating complements for history to tell untold and ignored parts. A work of literature can be deemed as a part of history since, having fictional elements does not necessarily mean that it cannot include historical aspects. Moreover including historical aspects does not mean that it is not a fiction.

Twelve Years a Slave works as an excavation into the labyrinth of History of the Black in fictional form and creates new knowledge, by subverting the hegemony of historical accounts. It provides aptly small story of slavery into American History, broadens previously disregarded histories. But by broadening, it also serves to remind us of how many stories remain untold. For every story "exposed," countless others are doomed to remain buried or have been lost entirely. The crimes committed in the name of slavery can never be cleansed and redeemed. The past maladies cannot be undone, but the future can be directed.

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