

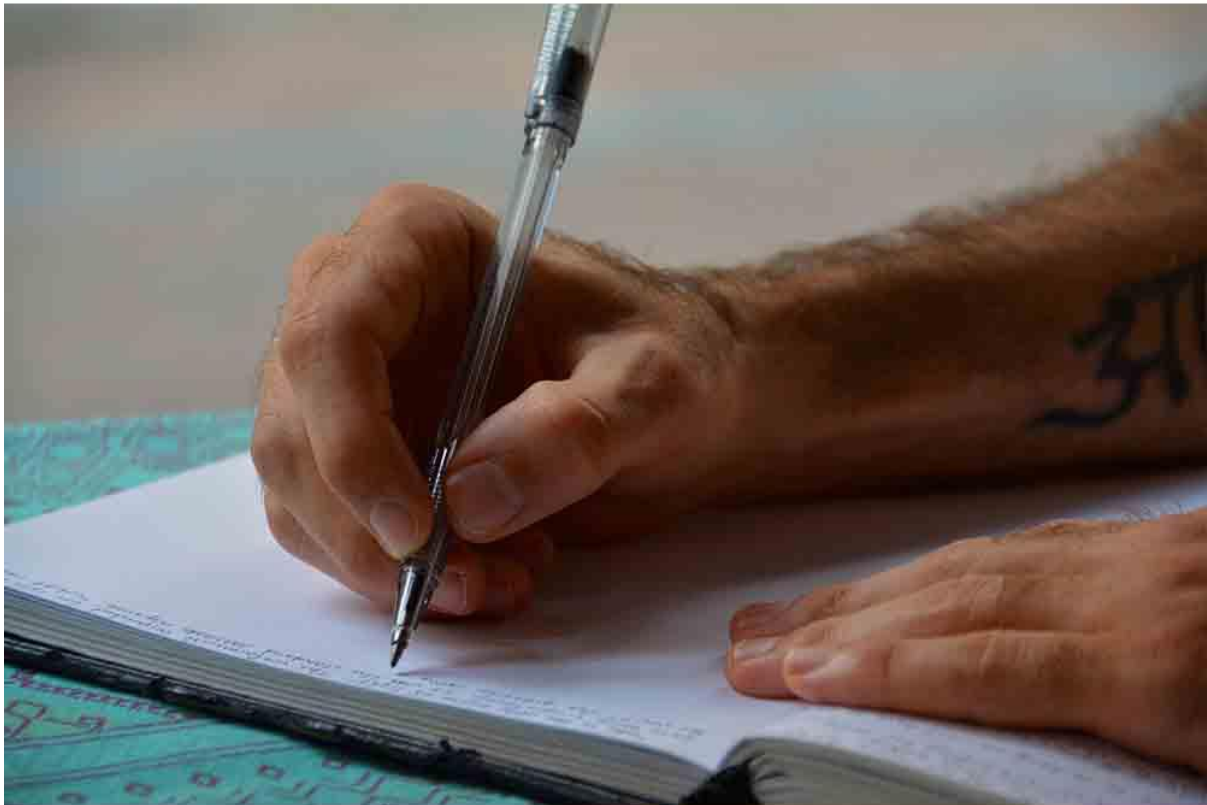
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The Representation of the slaves in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and
Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*

Abstract

Margaret Mitchell's plantation novel *Gone With The Wind* and Solomon Northup's autobiography *Twelve Years a Slave* are built upon a common foundation and explore the operations of the institution of slavery, a dark and dehumanizing part of American history, in the American south. Both the novels hold an account of the experience of the thralldom and forced labour imposed on the African Americans on the American soil, instantiating immense atrocity on the mind and body of the people belonging to a particular race. Despite being inspired by the same institution, and attempting at portraying the interracial relationship between the slave owners and the victims of slavery in the American Southern plantations, the novels differ considerably from one another in their treatment of the experience and consequence of slavery and the representation of the blacks. The paper seeks to explore the nature and extent of this variation in representation, functioning in the narratives and how the two contrasting description spring from the ethnic difference of the authors of the respective texts.

Keyword: Slavery, Blacks, Stereotypical, Marginalized, Freedom

Slavery operates very crucially in the plots of Solomon Northup's autobiography *Twelve Years a Slave* and Margaret Mitchell's historical novel *Gone with the Wind*. Set against the backdrop of American civil war, *Gone with the Wind* is a historical novel which has been translated into eighteen languages and made into an equally successful film in 1939. The success of the novel shows that it has been received very well by the mass, but one can raise question on the pro-slavery and racist content of the novel. It projects a stereotypical and marginalized picture of the blacks and legitimizes slavery. Such a representation becomes problematic when one considers the fact that the author of the novel is a white American woman. The subordinate and subsidiary portrayal of the blacks that are found in *Gone with the Wind* can be seen as the consequence of her white American origin.

Another novel which has blacks and slavery as crucial to its plot is Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave*. A major difference from *Gone with the Wind* is that the author of this novel is an African American man who was born free but sold into slavery. This major difference leads to a disparate representation of the blacks and slavery in *Twelve Years a Slave*. The picture that we find here contradicts Mitchell plantation fiction in various ways.

The perspectives of both the authors are different and this difference stems from their ethnic diversity and the time periods they belong to. Mitchell writes in 1936 when America was undergoing a crisis created by the Great Depression. Her novel can be read as aimed at empowering the white Americans to face the adversities of their time, as they have done in the past, during the civil war and the reconstruction. She writes from the standpoint of the white Americans and her narrative seems to glorify her white American heritage at the cost of legitimizing the institution of slavery.

Northup, on the other hand, had a lived experience of the institution of slavery and plantation life which is recorded in *Twelve Years a Slave*, published in 1853 after he was rescued in 1851 from a plantation in Louisiana. Northup tries to project the evils of slavery and further his purpose of abolitionist propaganda, that is, to effect the abolition of slavery.

In the process of serving the respective purposes, these writers had in mind, they give a divergent portrayal of blacks in their narratives also displaying the ideology they conformed to.

Due to the cultivation of crops like cotton, sugarcane, and tobacco in the southern states of America, a need for extensive manual labour in the field was created. The blacks were enslaved and made to do the hard labour in the field and were also forced to do the domestic chores for the white plantation owners. The liberation of the blacks would lead to a great financial loss which the plantation owners were not ready to incur. This made them anti-abolitionist campaigners, that is, they refused to liberate their black slaves. The Southern whites wrote several books and treatise to support their anti-abolitionist ideology. Mitchell writes the plantation fiction through which she advocates the anti-abolitionist claims of her Southern ancestors and eulogizes the institution of slavery as a benevolent arrangement built with the desire to protect the blacks and without which they would go wayward and directionless. The book was published in 1936 when America was experiencing an unprecedented financial hardship caused by the Great Depression. So a major telos towards which Mitchell worked is the celebration of the courage of the Southern white people which helped them to survive a crisis like the civil war and the reconstruction and cope with its trauma, which they are expected to repeat once more at the face of the present crisis which is again sending their nation into disruption. Such a picture of unflinching courage and communal solidarity would enliven the spirit of the people of her time living in a disruptive state. The issue of ancestry is carefully constructed by Mitchell in her text. At the end of the book when

Rhett abandons Scarlett, the spirit of her people is attributed to her-“with the spirit of her people who would not know defeat, even when it stared them in the face, she raised her chin” (Mitchell 1011) conveys that courage and a powerful wish to survive is inherent and strong in their blood. They have survived once and they can survive again. Mitchell depicts the blacks in such a way that it facilitates her to elevate the stature of the whites. Slavery was a major obstacle in her way to project a eulogistic picture of the whites. So it becomes important for her to project the blacks and slavery in such a light that it exempts the Southern whites of any guilt and legitimizes the system. Therefore she paints such a romantic picture of the plantation life that far from foregrounding the brutalities of the white plantation owners, it rather intensifies their morals and generosity. She constructs her narrative in ways that serve her dual purpose of justifying the pro-slavery sentiments of the Southern whites and at the same time shows them in a favourable light.

The strategy used to legitimize slavery is through depicting the black slaves as ignorant, weak and childlike, therefore in need of the protection of their superior Southern white owners. When Scarlett meets Big Sam and other boys from the plantation in Atlanta, they are shown to have “capered with delight at the meeting and with pride at displaying their comrades what Pretty Young Missy they had” (Mitchell 298). Again when Scarlett asks them what were they doing in Atlanta Big Sam answers in a childish way and Scarlett is not able to comprehend the meaning, “Lawd, Miss Scarlett! Ain’ you heerd? Us is ter dig de ditches fer de w’ite gempmums ter hide in w’en de Yankees comes” (Mitchell 299). Captain Randall and other occupants of the carriage smile at his “naive explanation of rifle-pits”. On a different occasion, when Scarlett travels to Atlanta from Tara with Prissy to nurse young Wade she thinks, “Prissy had never been more than a mile away from Twelve Oaks or Tara before, and a trip on a train plus her elevation to nurse was almost more than the brain in little black skull could bear” (Mitchell 142). By portraying the blacks as ignorant Mitchell intensifies the

generosity and benevolence of the white plantation owners who willingly offer to provide for and protect them. The narrative acknowledges the myth of “the white man’s burden”. The narrative is trying to impress that the whites being the more enlightened race do a favour on the blacks by showing mercy on them and the blacks should be grateful for that, instead, the blacks being blacks rebel against them. Such anti-abolitionist views were prevalent in the times of Northup as well. Being a supporter of the abolitionist campaign it was essential for him to oppose such views. According to Grey,

Slave narratives ideologically engaged four kinds of proslavery apologia: plantation romances like John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* (1832), which celebrated the South in pastoral terms; conservative and reactionary philosophies like John Calhoun’s “positive good” theory of slavery, which defended the plantation regime as the ideal solution to the class struggle between capital and labor; theological dissertations like Thornton Stringfellow’s *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery* (1841), which argued slavery was God’s plan for the uplift of heathen Africans; and finally, ethnological treatises, such as Samuel Cartwright’s work on negro physiology, which asserted blacks were adapted by nature to serve the superior white race. As regards proslavery literary works, the ex-slave Solomon Northup mused: “Men may write fictions portraying lowly-life as it is, or as it is not . . . But let them know the heart of the poor slave . . . and they will find that slaves cherish in their bosoms the love of freedom, as passionately as themselves (Grey 41).

Northup contests the fact that people belonging to the black race deserve to be slaves because they are intellectually and biologically inferior to the whites. Northup describes his early life saying he is born free and acquires the benefits which are hardly received by the people of his race and are usually reserved for the whites. His father encourages them to live

by the standard of respectability set by the whites and he himself does so, “Though born a slave, and labouring under the disadvantages to which my unfortunate race is subjected, my father was a man respected for his industry and integrity.... His whole life was passed in the peaceful pursuits of agriculture, *never seeking employment in those more menial positions, which seems especially allotted to the children of Africa*”(Northup 2, my italics).

Northup again says that he receives a kind of education which is hardly “bestowed upon children in our condition.” Northup’s father also acquires sufficient property which enables them to vote, a privilege rare to the blacks. Northup’s father tries to get a life for him and his children in which they can enjoy the social and cultural freedom and status enjoyed by the whites. He differentiates himself from other blacks that he meets during his servitude. He emphasizes constantly the shortcomings of the blacks who were born under servitude. Describing a slave girl Mary, he says, “Like many of her class, she scarcely knew there was such a word as freedom.” (Northup 35) He also hesitates from revealing any secret to the people of his own race and class. According to Northup, because they were “Brought up in fear and ignorance as they are, it can scarcely be conceived how servilely they will cringe before a white man’s look.” (Northup 41) Therefore he hesitates in “depositing so bold a secret with any of them”. Northup is different from them, but at the same time he is not completely accepted in the white society. He is kidnapped and sold into slavery because of his race. Even though he acquires the qualifications with which a white man adorns himself, yet he undergoes a miserable experience. This shows that only because of his racial background he has to suffer such tribulation. Northup might intend to mean that blacks are in no ways inferior to whites and they can also prove to be intellectually competent as the whites if they are given proper environment and facilities to cultivate their intellect. Slavery renders them ignorant because it provides them with no environment for intellectual development and hard labour looms large on their physical and intellectual faculties.

Through his autobiography, Northup gets an opportunity to write his own history. He projects the plights in the life of the blacks and shows how the blacks are subalternized by the system of slavery and how their voices are suppressed. The blacks lose their independent identity and turn into 'chattel property' of the whites as a consequence of slavery. Northup receives a severe flogging from Burch every time he asserts his independent identity. It homogenizes all slaves, stripping them off any dignity or animate status. Slaves are named by their owners depicting their very identity and existence is under the control of their masters. Northup is called Steward by Burch, Freeman names him Platt. His surname changes from Ford to Tibbeats and to Epps when his ownership is transferred. Even the name Northup, is taken from the white family to which his father belonged. The identity of the blacks when under servitude is determined by and attached to their owners. They lose their autonomy. Northup attempts to show the dystopian reality in the lives of the slaves. Instances of physical violence like flagellation at every mistake they make are common in the narrative. Slavery denies the blacks of any familial relations; Eliza is separated from her children never to see them again. David and Caroline are upset because they will be sold separately. The tragic fate of female slaves like Eliza and Patsy who become the prey of the atrocities of their master's jealous wife is foregrounded. According to Audrey Fish, "The evocation of proslavery hypocrisy was especially striking in regard to sexuality. The portrayal of male slaveholders as sexual predators was common. As the narrators said, slaveholders had the power to compel slave women to submit to sexual advances, and they used it" (Fish 31). The slave owners inflicted violence on the slaves to satisfy their whims. Fish points out, "Moreover, as many of the ex-slaves also showed, such slaveholder violence often slipped over into sadism: ingenious, gratuitous, even inflicted for pleasure" (Fish 38). Northup says, "when in his cups, Master Epps delighted in whipping his "niggers", "just for the pleasure of hearing them screech and scream, as the great welts were planted on their backs" (Northup 112).

Being a white woman Mitchell tries to give the history of the Southern plantation owners from the perspective of the whites. Her narrative can be seen as refuting other versions of history which do not consolidate her perspective. Northup's narrative shows that flagellation is common with the slave owners like Epps and Tibeates although he excludes Ford from this list. *Gone with the Wind* expresses that plantation owners in the Clayton County were benevolent masters concerned about the wellbeing of their slaves. Beatrice Tarleton would whip her sons but not her slaves or her horses. Gerald O'Hara is known to whip a slave only once in a lifetime. Eliza is separated from her children never to see them again in Northup's account; on the other hand, Gerald O'Hara buys *Dilcey* and Prissy so that they can stay together with Pork. Family ties are broken in *Twelve Years a Slave* whereas in *Gone with the Wind* the benevolent masters are shown to preserve and respect family bonds of those who serve them. Mitchell's narrative is in stark contrast with that of Northup's. Mitchell is spatially and temporally removed from civil war period. Her plantation fiction is a perspective based narrative, romanticizing the institution of slavery and highlights the idyllic, pre civil war plantation life in the south to project their ideology in a favourable and benevolent light which, on the other hand, is meant to erase the history of oppression and dehumanizing labour. Northup has lived experience of slavery. The evils of slavery projected in his autobiography are experienced by him so it proves to be a firsthand experience from a person who belonged to the slave community and has suffered its atrocities, about which Mitchell is trying to talk about.

The narrative of Mitchell seems refutes abolitionist arguments by reducing the gravity of the violence inflicted on the blacks by making them appear as false and exaggerated versions of the plantation life. When some Yankee women ask Scarlett about the bloodhounds which were kept to pursue the runaway slaves she answers she has only "seen one bloodhound in all her life and it was a mild dog not a huge ferocious mastiff" but the

Yankees did not believe her. In Northrup, we find several accounts of such bloodhounds. Northrup and another slave Wiley are pursued by them, which emerges as a jarring and violent episode. The disbelief of the Yankee women show how widespread the stories were but they had hardly any authenticity in them. The narrative impress that the blacks are childlike people who can prove to be dangerous when influenced by wrong forces like the Yankees. After Freedman's Bureau was proclaimed, the picture of the blacks found in *Gone with the Wind* showcases how helpless the blacks become when they were freed. Atlanta is full of blacks, diseases are all over and the narrator of *Gone with the Wind* says, due to long dependence on "the care of their mistresses when they were ill in slave days", they felt helpless, not knowing what should be done next and unwilling to take responsibilities of their life on being free "they now had no sense of responsibility for their helplessness". The children are described to run like "frightened animals about the town until kind-hearted white people took them into their kitchens to raise" (Mitchell 639). Whereas deserted and utterly confused aged "county darkies" called out and requested the ladies passing by to write to their former masters. The picture of panicked and bewildered blacks running dreadfully around the town shows how they were in utter confusion to appreciate their new found freedom. Instead of cherishing their liberty they remember fondly and want to return to the security and "comfort" of their former life as slaves.

The others who turn hostile to the former masters are termed as "mean" even in their slave days. But the blacks are not held responsible for this. They are seen as mindless people whose conduct depends on the way they are regulated by the whites. The northerners are held responsible for placing the germ of hatred against their master in the mind of the blacks. Though the Northerners try to liberate the blacks saying that they are equal they actually do not trust them and are afraid of them. When Scarlett suggests a Yankee woman to keep a black woman to nurse her children three women break into "indignant outcries" and the

woman says “ I wouldn’t trust them any farther than I could see them, and as for letting them handling my babies...” This displays the hypocrisy of the Northern whites only to justify that the Southerners can be the true guardians of the blacks and validates the anti-abolitionist ideology.

Northup supports his abolitionist agenda by showing how slavery not only is detrimental to the development of the blacks but is equally regressive for the whites. He counters the anti-abolitionist argument that Africans are inherently ignorant and so they need the support of the whites to survive. The institution of slavery ruins the “humane and finer feelings” in the nature of the whites. Northup believes, “it is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives” (Northup144). He also believes it is difficult to “...withstand the influence of habit and associations that surround him. Taught from earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears, that the rod is for the slaves back, he will not be apt to change his opinion in mature years.”(Northup144)

Gone with the Wind is a history of the blacks in America from the perspective of a white woman. The kind of representation of the blacks that is found in this narrative is influenced by her sentiment to project a harmonious master slave relationship between the blacks and the Southern whites and thereby justifying the institution of slavery. Northup’s autobiography projects that the blacks deserve to be free as much the whites do. It gives a critique of the egalitarian and meritocratic system so valued in America. The values embodied by the American Dream, are criticized when it stays only limited to the white males and fails to incorporate the other subjects of America. Northup is taken into captivity in Washington, the seat of America’s egalitarian ideology. Northup ruminates, as he passes handcuffed through the streets of Washington that, it is the Capital of a nation whose government, is founded on the principle of right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, yet they are captivated to be sold into slavery devoid of any right to pursue their happiness.

Northup's observation aptly summarizes the double standards embedded in America's ideology of equality and why people like Northup have to pay grave price for not belonging to the dominant class, only who are exclusively capable of enjoying the privileges of the American soil. His represent the blacks illustrate the perils of slavery and how the system of slavery dehumanizes them.

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