Interactions: **An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
(Online ISSN 2347-2081) **Vol. II Issue IV, July 2015**

A STUDY OF SELECTED SLAVE NARRATIVES: MAPPING THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND SLAVE SONGS

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Abstract

The genre of slave narratives holds an influential place in the African-American literary tradition. The present paper seeks to analyze a few slave narratives – Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself by Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, Written by Himself by Henry Bibb and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself by Harriet Jacobs. The purpose is to underscore some of the aesthetic elements, argumentative strategies and literary techniques which characterize the genre and have enabled their success. This paper also concerns itself with the gamut of black religious experience and practice. It seeks to explore how slaves interpreted and adapted the teachings of Christianity and blended it with their African culture. The paper also traces how slaves carried forward their rich African-American legacy by narrating their experiences and expressing their religious views through the medium of songs and spirituals.

Key Words: African-American literary tradition, aesthetic elements, argumentative strategies and literary techniques, black religious experience, slave songs and spirituals

"No man can put a chain around the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck."
—Frederick Douglass, liberated slave and civil rights activist, 1883

The genre of slave narratives holds an influential place in the African-American literary tradition. The progression of the slave narrative genre is noticeable from its nascent stage in the 1700s through the final narratives recorded in the 1900s.These literary undertakings of the fugitive slaves were translated into many languages and gained immense popularity. In the nineteenth century, there appeared a flurry of autobiographies written by the run-away or freed slaves narrating the horrors of slavery – the debasement, victimization, and dehumanizing treatment at the hands of masters and their consequent courageous escape which transcended all odds and barriers. From time to time, the slaves voiced their dissent overtly as well as covertly. An open rebellion, the Nat Turner Rebellion (1831) spurred anti-slavery agitation including the publication of slave narratives. However, the slave narratives

did not merely give a peep into the harsh and demeaning lives of the slaves. Additionally, they served a strategic ideological purpose of raising the conscience of the people in the north towards the miserable plight of the southern slaves and tried to usher in reforms by evoking sympathy for the abolitionist cause. Hence, these slave narratives were clearly not apolitical, rather they served a specific political agenda. Despite the noble and benevolent intentions of the writers to represent unvarnished reality without either exaggeration or white-washing, the veracity or credibility of their content has been often disputed. The extent to which their ideological content outweighs their artistic and aesthetic valuehas been ascertainedby many scholars since many narrators wrote under the tutelage of abolitionists.

Most of the narratives represent an upward climb from the claustrophobic, back- and spirit-breaking South to a paradisiacal, free North; a rise from the pits of humiliation and subservience to a state of dignity and individuality. There are certain tropes and motifs which are common among most of the slave narratives namely ‘bildungsroman’ motif, quest for identity, familial ties, theme of community, detailed graphic horrors of whipping and other means of physical punishment, slave songs as a means of catharsis and resistance, and the black religious experience. Mostly, the fugitive slaves had to abide by the well-defined conventions and formulas in reproducing their tales of woes and eventual triumph from slavery to freedom. Despite their similar themes and motifs, many slave narratives have been able to carve a niche and establish their independent entity in the canon of this literary genre.

The experiences and miseries of female slaves were more disturbing since the female slaves suffered doubly for being women. Sexual assault, forced pregnancies, imposed concubinage, and physical abuse fell to the lot of female slaves. Additionally, they had to face the wrath and jealousy of masters’ wives for being the sexual partners of their masters. It is clear that a female slave experience will differ in many aspects from a male slave experience. In Harriet Jacobs’s own words: “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 76). Her mistress’s father Dr. Flint made repeated sexual advances towards her and she had no escape route from this torture. Jacobs says, “He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof as him” (Jacobs 32)

The present paper seeks to analyze a few slave narratives – Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself by Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, Written by Himself by Henry Bibb and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself by Harriet Jacobs. The purpose is to underscore some of the aesthetic elements, argumentative strategiesand literary techniques which characterize the genre and have enabled their success. This paper also concerns itself with the gamut of black religious experience and practice as well as the importance of slave songs. It seeks to explorethe epistemology behind the issues of race, gender, and politics in this literary genre.

The selected narratives are situated within the context of the steady expansion of slavery in the U.S. and its eventual abolition. Due to a relative lack of educational opportunities for the

slaves, it was often believed that these narratives must be an outcome of white abolitionist ghostwriters.Sometimes, a ghostwriter serves a subject who wants a professional help to articulate his/her thoughts and experiences into a publishable story. The ghostwritten accounts are however written in the first person to give an illusion of an autobiography and to also to maintain narrative cohesion and authorial semblance. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and Henry Bibb are, however, exemplary of strong-willed intellectuals who learned to read and write even in the face of adverse circumstances. Douglass says, "Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch" (Douglass 62 [2013]). In the selected slave narratives, there has been an attempt to establish the authenticity of the author as well as the content presented by adding 'Written by Himself' and 'Written by Herself' to the title. In an attempt to vouch for the veracity of the accounts, the prefaces to slave narratives are often inundated with information relative to the circumstances in which the manuscripts were prepared.

In Douglass's Preface, Garrison tells us that: "Mr. DOUGLASS has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ someone else.(Douglass 8 [2013]). As discussed before, William Lloyd Garrison strikes at the conscience of the readers with a strong emotional appeal and asks them rhetorically, "Reader! are you with the man-stealers in sympathy and purpose, or on the side of their down-trodden victims? If with the former, then are you the foe of God and man. If with the latter, what are you prepared to do and dare in their behalf?" (Douglass 13 [2013]).He invokes God and humanity to state his ideological purpose of abolition of slavery.

Jacobs's narrative has enriched the African-American literary tradition by presenting a unique chronicle of the efforts of an under-privileged black woman. She published her autobiography in antebellum America but some historians as well as readers turned her autobiography into a questionable slave narrative. Later on, a critic Jean Fagan Yellin put to rest the doubts with "discovery of a cache of her letters" (Yellin 479). Yellin writes, "This correspondence establishes Jacobs' authorship and clarifies the role of her editor" (480). Like Douglass, Jacobs also appeals to the readers when she says:

I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions. I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty.(Jacobs 12)

Lydia Maria Child, a prominent white abolitionist writer, edited Harriet Jacobs's manuscript and helped her publish it in Boston. Jacobs has used the pseudonym Linda Brent for her narrative and the names of other persons have also been fictionalized.Nevertheless, the details are authentic. Confirming the credibility of Jacobs's authorship, Child says, ". . . such changes as I have made have been mainly for the purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added anything to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks. With trifling exceptions, both the ideas and the language are her own" (Jacobs 11).

Jacobs starts her narrative with a blissful ignorance of her formative years about her slavery: “I WAS born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (Jacobs 11). Her first mistress was a loving ladyand Jacobs loved her in equal measure. She says, “I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me” (Jacobs 15). Jacobs gets an edge over other slaves because of her literate status for which she adores her mistress: “While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory” (Jacobs 16). Her untold miseries begin after the death of her mistress. Jacobs was fortunate enough to know receive the love and affection of her parents though they died when she was quite young. Henry Bibb begins his narrative by recalling his birth in 1815 to a slave woman named Mildred Jackson. Though he never knew his father, Bibb was told that he was the son of a white man named James Bibb. Douglass’s genealogy is no better known to him than Bibb. Douglass says, “Of my father I know nothing. Slavery had no recognition of fathers, as none of families” (11, 2008).It is clear that slaveholders tried to rob them off their name and identity by withholding parental information and erased all traces of their independent identity.

Importance of Slave Songs

From Jacobs’ account, a poignant truth comes to light which foregrounds the plight of female slaves. Sometimes, slave mothers wished that their children might die in infancy. Jacobs writes, “God tried me. My darling became very ill. The bright eyes grew dull, and the little feet and hands were so icy cold that I thought death had already touched them. I had prayed for his death, but never so earnestly as I now prayed for his life; and my prayer was heard. Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery” (63). For slave mothers, motherhood was an ambivalent experience. Many a time, motherhood was imposed due to the lust of the white masters. Some were forced to lavish time and care on the master's babies rather than their own. In spite of their hardships, these women managed to respond creatively to their turbulent conflicting experience of motherhood. As is known about African-American culture, music allowed for survival. Slave songs about mothering offer a peep inside these women’s hearts.

There were myriad other creative ways in which slaves carried forward their rich African-American legacy by narrating their experiences and expressing their religious views through the medium of songs and spirituals. It would not be an exaggeration to say that music, dance and singing were not merely a part of their lives, rather these were intrinsic to ‘their way of life’. In almost all slave narratives, songs have been used as a means of catharsis. This medium of expression was used as an outlet for the pent-up emotions against the barbarous institution of slavery. Douglass writes that they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. He maintains, “I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do”(Douglass 13 [2013]). He writes further, “Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains”(Douglass 34 [2013]). It is essential to underscore the real motive or intentions

behind their singing since their songs sprung forth from the deep recesses of hearts full of sorrows and sufferings. Douglass remarks that the slaves were supposed to be the most contented and happy laborers in the world, and their dancing and singing were referred to in proof of this alleged fact; but he refutes this assumption by saying that "it was a great mistake to suppose them happy because they sometimes made those joyful noises. The songs of the slaves represented their sorrows, rather than their joys. Like tears, they were a relief to aching hearts" (44).Nevertheless, their spirituals and songs helped a lot in lifting their drooping spirits though temporarily.

Another reason for the flourishing of slave songs has been documented by Douglass. According to Douglass, slaves were expected by masters and overseers to sing as well as to work. The natural disposition of the negro to make a noise in the world coupled with the wish of the masters may account for the almost constant singing at their work. For the masters or the overseers, exhorting them to sing was also a means of keeping a check on the slaves lest any of them played truant. Douglass writes, "It was a means of telling the overseer, in the distance, where they were, and what they were about"(43). For Douglass, "the heart has no language like song" (44). Many years ago, when recollecting his experience in this respect, Douglass writes of slave songs in the following strain:

I did not, when a slave, fully understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was, myself, within the circle, so that I could then neither hear nor see as those without might see and hear. They breathed the prayer and complaint of souls overflowing with the bitterest anguish. They depressed my spirits and filled my heart with ineffable sadness.(44)

Though singing was often encouraged by the plantation overseers or the slaveholders for their own entertainment and to keep a vigil on the slaves, yet the slaves succeeded in outwitting their masters by encoding their songs and spirituals with secret meanings which was comprehensible to the slave groups only or their allies. Sambol-Tosco says, "Slaves sang spirituals filled with lyrics about salvation and references to biblical figures like Moses, who led his people to freedom. On occasion, these songs functioned even more explicitly as expressions of resistance, encoding messages about secret gatherings or carrying directions for escape." In Thomas Johnson's slave narrative (Twenty-Eight Years a Slave), he describes the risk that slaves had to take to meet in prayer groups and sing hymns and spirituals. Johnson mentions the Jubilee Singers, a group of black musicians who performed spirituals in concerts around America and Europe after the Civil War. Another slave narrative writer, William H. Robinson (author of From Log Cabin to the Pulpit) worked for many years as a traveling singer and banjo player after the abolition of slavery in 1865, then attended Central Tennessee College and became a minister. In his narrative, he writes about the secret meanings of many spirituals. Most often, the slaves composed their own songs and hymns, and they did not bother much about measure. Jacobs writes that they often sing the following verses:

Old Satan is one busy ole man;
He rolls dem blocks all in my way;

But Jesus is my bosom friend;
He rolls dem blocks away. (Jacobs 69)

Slaves' Religious Experience

Apart from singing and composing spirituals, religion formed the core of the lives of slaves. They experiencedreligion (here Christianity) to be Janus-faced. One facet offered promise of deliverance from slavery whereas the religion of white slaveholders justified bondage. Southern African-Americans experienced and transformed Protestant Christianity into the central institution of community life ("The Church"). There were tensions and contradictions between the egalitarian potential of evangelical Christianity and the harsh realities of slavery. In many slave narratives, it has been depicted how "the black community adapted evangelical Christianity, making it a metaphor for freedom, community, and personal survival" ("The Church").

For centuries, religion has been used as a tool by its self-proclaimed stakeholders who distort and twist the teachings of the scriptures to suit their vested interests. The autobiographical accounts of the slaves are a testimony to the hypocrisy of the white masters as well as priests who reinforce and perpetuate the degrading institution of slavery by quoting selective passages from the Bible. Many slave narratives document theblack religious beliefs and outrightly reject the hierarchical concept of Christianity of the whites. There are numerous allusions and references to the Bible found in many slave narratives. They comprehended the teachings and writings of the Bible as a palliative. Henry Bibb, in his slave narrative gives an account of his constant frustration and disillusionment arising due to his repeated unsuccessful attempts to flee from bondage and his constant recapture. He tried to flee pressing his way to the North for refuge; but the river Ohio was "an impassable gulf" (Bibb 29). He writes further:

I had no rod wherewith to smite the stream, and thereby divide the waters. I had no Moses to go before me and lead the way from bondage to a promised land. Yet I was in a far worse state than Egyptian bondage; for they had houses and land; I had none; they had oxen and sheep; I had none; they had a wise counsel, to tell them what to do, and where to go, and even to go with them; I had none. I was surrounded by opposition on every hand. My friends were few and far between. I have often felt when running away as if I had scarcely a friend on earth.(29)

According to Maffly-Kipp, in the Southern states beginning in the 1770s, increasing numbers of slaves converted to evangelical religions such as the Methodist and Baptist faiths. Many clergy within these denominations actively promoted the idea that all Christians were equal in the sight of God, a message that provided hope and sustenance to the slaves. They also encouraged worship in ways that many Africans found to be similar, or at least adaptable, to African worship patterns, with enthusiastic singing, clapping, dancing, and even spirit-possession (Maffly-Kipp). Still, many white owners and clergy preached a message of strict obedience to the masters. Blacks were not allowed to form their separate churches lest they could plot rebellion against their owners.

It becomes clear from the reading of various slave narratives how slaveholders justified their acts of barbarity by referring to various passages in the Bible. Douglass voices his dissent and says, "I saw that slaveholders would have gladly made me believe that, in making a slave of me and in making slaves of others, they were merely acting under the authority of God, and I felt to them as to robbers and deceivers. The feeding and clothing me well could not atone for taking my liberty from me" (Douglass 60 [1882]). Later on, abolitionists searched for liberationalelements in the Bible and believed passionately in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Coffey writes, "Indeed, the campaign's logo (devised by Josiah Wedgwood) was an image of a manacled slave on his knees beseeching his captor: 'Am I not a man and a brother?' Antislavery activism relied on the conviction that all people were made in God's image (Genesis 1:26–27) and precious in his sight. God was the Father of all mankind . . . ."

During the high time of slavery, slaves were prohibited by law to impart or partake of any mental and religious instruction. The state of Georgia, by an act of 1770 had enforced complete prohibition of religious meetings or similar congregations by free negroes as well as slaves. Similar laws existed in most of the slave States, and patrols are sent out after night and on the Sabbath day to enforce them. Bibb documents how the teaching of the Bible was strictly forbidden and any venture to open up Sabbath school wasfoiled by the slaveholders. He writes, 'The Sabbath is not regarded by a large number of the slaves as a day of rest. They have no schools to go to; no moral nor religious instruction at all in many localities where there are hundreds of slaves" (Bibb 21-22). Due to the want of Sabbath schools, many slaves resorted to gambling, drinking, fighting, kicking, and breaking the Sabbath. Such boisterous and rowdy amusement was encouraged by the slaveholders for their own sport as well as to keep the slaves ignorant by denying them moral and religious education. Bibb maintains, "But this is all principally for want of moral instruction. This is where they have no Sabbath Schools; no one to read the Bible to them; no one to preach the gospel who is competent to expound the Scriptures, except slaveholders. And the slaves, with but few exceptions, have no confidence at all in their preaching because they preach a pro-slavery doctrine" (Bibb 23-24).

Similar views are expounded by Douglass when he says, "But to meet for the purpose of improving the mind and heart, by learning to read the sacred scriptures, was a nuisance to be instantly stopped" (Douglass 123 [1882]). He despises the fake morality of the whites and is flabbergasted to when the three cruel white slaveholders are adjudged to be the true followers of Christ. He says, ". . . yet these men, armed with mob-like missiles, ferociously rushed in upon my Sabbath-school and forbade our meeting again on pain of having our backs subjected to the bloody lash(Douglass 86, 2008). Douglass blatantly criticizes the sham hidden behind the façade of the self-proclaimed religious slaveholders and unveils their hypocrisy when he says, "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" (Douglass 103 [2013]). Douglass tells that his master attended a Methodist camp-meeting and there experienced religion. A flicker of hope arose in

Douglass's heart that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and if this does not happen, at least, he would become more kind and humane. Douglass narrates his disillusionment because after his conversion, his master found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. Douglass ironically remarks, "He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer" (Douglass 80 [2013]). He also explains his cruelty of whipping up a lame young woman brutally and in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture — "He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes."(Douglass 81 [2013]).

Douglass has included an Appendix in his narrative to absolve himself of the charge of upholding anti-Christian ethics. He describes the wide disparity between the Christianity of the slaveholders and Christianity of Christ: "I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity"(Douglass 143 [2013]). According to Douglass, the so-called religious people follow the Christian faith only in name not in its true spirit. He writes, "They attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith. . . . They love the heathen on the other side of the globe. They can pray for him, pay money to have the Bible put into his hand, and missionaries to instruct him; while they despise and totally neglect the heathen at their own doors"(Douglass 147 [2013]).

Jacobs's first mistress was kind but even she was indoctrinated not to consider a slave as her equal. Jacobs says,"My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Jacobs 15). She further writes, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor." (Jacobs 15). After her first mistress bequeathed Linda to her five year old niece, it is the little girl's father Dr. Flint who exerts complete control over Linda. Dr. Flint, who is a member of the Episcopal Church, tries to convince Linda to have physical relations with him and still be considered virtuous.

Jacobs gives title "The Church and Slavery" to one of the chapters in her narrative and discusses how after the Nat Turner Rebellion subsided, the slaveholders resorted to imparting some religious instruction to the slaves to prevent them from murdering their masters. However, such religious doctrine was merely a pretext to condition them to accept their subservient status as part of Divine plan. Linda is invited to hear the sermon at the house of a free black man, Reverend Pike. However, the gospel he preaches is a pro-slavery doctrine as he says: "If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God's commandments. When you go from here, don't stop at the corners of the streets to talk, but go directly home, and let your master and mistress see that you have come"(Jacobs 69). He preaches slaves about their Christian ethical obligation to be obedient, hardworking, servants to their masters. Jacobs remarks, "There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south. If a man goes to the communion table, and pays money

in to the treasury of the church, no matter if it be the price of the blood, he is called religious" (Jacobs 74). Jacobs cites the example of uncle Fred, who thirsts for the knowledge of scripture (The Bible) but the law forbids it, and their churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home(Jacobs 113). Though disillusioned with the Episcopal church, Jacobs' visit to England re-instills a message of hope and faith. Her stay at a clergyman's place in England is a memorable one since he is "a true disciple of Jesus" and Jacobs writes, "The beauty of his daily life inspired me with faith in the genuineness of Christian professions. Grace entered my heart, and I knelt at the communion table, I trust in true humility of soul" (Jacobs 167). From her account, the readers are given a peep into how deeply entrenched racial prejudice was in America, but in England, Jacobs had almost forgotten about color bias. Jacobs maintain that finally, even religion was free of the same hypocrisy and Christians there actually followed the tenets of the Bible and lived moral lives.

From the discussion, there has been an attempt to give an insight into the influence these slave narratives had on the antebellum black literature and subsequently, in shaping black theology.Since these narratives followed a prescribed format, thematic commonalities are not surprising. These narratives often employ similar tropes and emerge out of connected historical circumstances. Black churches, since then, have adapted the teachings of Christianity and searched for an egalitarian voice in it. The blacks have tried to subvert the hierarchical forms of Christianity and many a time, blended it with their African rites, rituals and forms of worship. Hence, their approach towards religion may be deemed syncretistic. The study has also traced the importance of slave songs and spirituals in the lives of slaves. To encapsulate, religion and slave songs formed an intrinsic part of the social fabric of their lives, and many a time, songs and egalitarian form of Christianity sustained hope for them for a better and free future life.

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[i] For this research paper, I have used the different publication years (due to multiple editions consulted) of Frederick Douglass's narrative for the references in the text. The square brackets within the parenthetical references in the text indicate the year of publication.