

Antebellum Slave Narratives and American Civil War

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Abstract:

Slave narratives are the autobiographical accounts of fugitive slaves who escaped successfully into the northern states of America. These narratives are either written by the slaves themselves or narrated to white writers mostly to abolitionists. Slave narratives showed vividly the true picture of slavery, particularly slaves' horrible existence in southern states of United States of America. These narratives are an instant success and they not only influenced the public opinion in northern states of America but also other parts of the world against continuation of slavery in the United States of America. The abolitionist working against slavery got boosting with the success of slave narratives. The momentum to abolish slavery in America grew; it gave rise to fears among politicians of southern states. The agrarian based southern economy heavily depended on slave labour. Many southern politicians for their personal intentions influenced slaveholding states to form Confederate States of America and declared their secession from the United States of America. Abraham Lincoln was declared as president of America and even before he took oath of his office the secession took place. American Civil War broke out on 12th April 1861 that led to more than half a million deaths of Americans and the war ended with the victory of the Union. On 1st January, President Abraham Lincoln signed the emancipation declaration abolishing slavery in United States of America. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on 14th April 1865 and on 6th December 1865 the thirteenth amendment to the constitution was ratified abolishing slavery.

Keywords: American Slavery; Antebellum Era; Slave Narratives; Civil War; Union; Confederate States.

Antebellum Slave Narratives:

The accounts of the former slaves documented in the nineteenth century are known as slave narratives. They are either written by the slaves or dictated to others. These narratives are valuable source for study of the American Negro slavery. The development of slave narratives as a genre was not smooth and it did not happen all of a sudden. It took time to evolve into a literary form. Many slave narratives have been written from the beginning of 19th century and new slave narratives continued to be published many decades after the end of American Civil War. Frances S. Foster states that, “Both in terms of popularity and of literary achievement, it is more accurate to consider the period between 1831 and 1865 as the golden age of the slave narratives.” (Foster 61) As it is already discussed that these slave narratives are autobiographical accounts of former slaves and the North American scholar Elizabeth Bruss states two grounds for autobiographical writings:

- (a) Under existing conventions, a claim is made for the truth-value of what the autobiography reports—no matter how difficult that truth-value might be to ascertain, whether the report treats of private experiences or publicly observable occasions.
- (b) The audience is expected to accept these reports as true, and is free to —check up on them or attempts to discredit them. (Bruss 11)

Antebellum slave narratives are to be attested by white people about the trustworthiness and character of the narrator to get them published.

Anti-slavery supporters who are known as abolitionists always felt that the slave narratives are the greatest weapons in supporting their movement. On the other hand, people from the proslavery did not accept the slave narratives as an authentic text citing that the abolitionists heavily edited them. Ulrich B. Phillips was upfront in rejecting the slave narratives, “ex-slaves narratives in general...were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful.” (Phillips 219) However, for a very long time, a nationwide debate continued to accept these slave narratives as critical documents. These slave narratives are subjected to scrutiny by both the parties. Primarily the scrutiny is done about the authenticity of these narratives.

Members of the abolitionist movement took initiative in publishing these works. Frances S. Foster explains why the slave narratives helped the abolitionists:

The narratives included descriptions of the structure and practices of slavery. As slavery became more inhumane, the narratives began to expose its abuses and to agitate for the abolition of slave trade. Finally, they began to defend blacks as legitimate and respectable members of the human race and to focus upon the perniciousness of a system which pretended otherwise. They began to demand the immediate elimination of all forms of slavery. During this process, the basic concerns of the narratives became increasingly compatible with those of antislavery societies. (Foster 17)

Slave narratives helped the abolitionists to show the whole world the horrors of slavery that existed in southern states of America. These narratives gained immediate popularity and their cause got immense support from the society. These works are reprinted to meet the demand in the market. Frances S. Foster mentions the popularity of slave narratives during the period of publication, “Quantity is not the only indication of a genre’s popularity. Nonetheless, an idea of public’s predilection for the slave narratives can be seen by the number of editions printed and copies sold during the time in which they were being written.” (Foster 22) For the first time, Free States of America and the world at large comes to know the dark side of slavery in southern states of America. People start growing sympathetic towards African American race and their cause. The efforts of abolitionists get boosting with the change.

Initially, these narratives faced intense criticism from some quarters. The criticism is that the narratives are fictitious and did not contain real evidence to substantiate their claims. However, former slaves like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Harriet Jacobs and others start giving names of slaveholders and their families. According to Frances S. Foster, people like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, talked about the importance of their experiences as slaves:

...included discussions of the social and political relevance of their experiences ...for they provided details about the life-styles and attitudes of southern whites and blacks for many who simply wanted to know more about the South. (Foster 20)

They even gave details of the plantations and places of their confinement in support of their narratives. However, they did not reveal the names of the people who helped them in escaping and the routes of their escape. It is because it is going to harm the slaves who are planning their escape and it would endanger the life of those who helped them.

The Former slaves involve in playing an active role in the abolitionist movement. They did not stop with the attainment of their freedom but doubled their effort to find ways to abolish slavery at large. They are encouraged by the activists of the abolition movement to give spirited speeches in support of their cause. Slave narratives become fundamental documents for the abolitionists to fight against slavery during the antebellum era in America. According to abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, these slave narratives gave an accurate picture of the plight of African Americans in the South. Frances S. Foster agrees the, "Slave narratives soon emerged as a distinct genre recognizable by its form, content, and relation to the cultural matrix. As sociohistorical experiences of the narrators became more obviously different from those of their audience, their writings reflected this change."(Foster 5) These narratives touched the hearts and influenced many people in northern states of the United States who are either ignorant or indifferent till then.

Slave narratives are of a great help for the historians to record American southern history. They made historians to look at southern American history again and to reconstruct it in its true sense. The abolitionists mostly whites, started working with the runaway slaves towards the abolition of slavery in America. The slaves who escaped to the Free States gave their account of the horrors of slavery that existed in southern states of America. These slave narratives were successful in influencing the public opinion in northern states of America against the continuation of slavery in United States of America. The issue of slavery was one of the main topics that were widely debated during the nineteenth quadrennial presidential elections of 1860.

American Civil War:

Many historians believe that conflicts on the institution of slavery led to American Civil War. Republican Party's candidate Abraham Lincoln was elected as president. Many southern states depended more on their slaves for their agricultural produce were not happy and they also wanted to bring slavery into the new western territories against the Missouri compromise. Seven southern states of America formed Confederate States of America and decided to secede from the American Union even before Abraham Lincoln took charge as president of United States of American. Unionist in the South and northern states as a whole wanted to preserve the American Union and it was like white southern nationalism against American nationalism. Stephanie McCurry states that one year before the campaign for presidential election politics turned very complex; he believed that politicians from the South imagined a separate nation for their individual larger political roles:

A group of southern politicians conspired, schemed, and colluded to maneuver their states out of the union from the Southerners' perspective, secession represented both an end and a beginning: an end to the frustration and stagnation of sectional conflict; a beginning of the great work of making a new nation.... They sought nothing less than to build the first independent slaveholders' republic in the Western Hemisphere and to launch it into a leading role in the game of nations.... (McCurry 11)

By mid-nineteenth century tensions among the North and the South states reached a breaking point over slavery. Before the 1860 presidential election association was formed in South Carolina to print pamphlets and tracts that included statements like "The South Alone Shall Govern The South." (McCurry 29)

The subjugation of the African American race through slavery became the leading cause of America civil war fought between 1861 to 1865. This is a period during which Abraham Lincoln became the president at a crucial point of American history. He always worked towards the preservation of the American Union. He even went to the extent of rejecting abolitionists' measure if they threatened the American Union. In Abraham Lincoln's words, "house divided

against itself" threatens to break the American Union. Eric Foner, agrees the importance of the issue of slavery in American politics before Civil War, "It simply means that it increasingly became impossible to think seriously about American society without somehow coming to grips with slavery and the Union."(Foner 11)

Slave narratives, polemical speeches, and editorials reveal the cruelties and the destructiveness of slavery. Literary genres, like sentimental novels, influenced American people and appeals to their emotions in favour of anti-slavery. Novels like Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe was an immediate success in bringing African American cause to the forefront of American consciousness. Literature played an essential role in shaping the opinions of people for more significant social reform. When Stowe visited the White House in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln is said to have remarked, 'So you are the little women who wrote the book that started this big war.'

The American Civil War began, within a month of Abraham Lincoln's inauguration as president in 1861. Abraham Lincoln went ahead with total abolition of slavery by issuing Emancipation proclamation an executive order on January first 1863. He was brave to declare "We must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." (Lincoln 64). Armies of the Confederate States and the Union fought against each other in various battles during the course of America Civil War. The battle of Gettysburg in early July 1863 was the bloodiest battle of the American civil war with nearly fifty-one thousand casualties. The battle gave a deadly blow to the confederate army, from where they could not recover. According To Roger L. Ransom, casualties of Civil War were very high:

The American civil war was one of those events that inalterably changed the course of the history. One out of every four soldiers who fought in the civil war lost his life, a toll larger than the total number of military deaths in all other American wars from the American revolution....(Ransom 2)

To revive Confederate states, conspirators assassinated Abraham Lincoln on fourteenth April 1865. The thirteenth constitutional amendment to abolish slavery in United States of

America was ratified on eighteenth of December 1865. According to Eric Foner, American Civil War gave rise to unanswered vital questions which still remain decisive in American society:

The Civil War, after all, raised the decisive questions of our national existence -war and peace, relationship of the states and the federal government...of course, the pervasive problem of race and which still bedevils American society, challenging it to live up to its lofty professed ideals. The themes of race and class, the debates over the meaning of freedom and disadvantage in America, remain controversial. (Foner 12)

The discrimination against blacks has not totally stopped in America. American society cannot claim the status of a developed society or a nation, as long as the constitutional promises are not fulfilled. Still African Americans need a place in all the level playing fields in the American society. After the Civil War many new generations have come and gone but racism somehow is still lingering and unwilling to die. Many Americans are proud of their country's political dominance in the world and that authority coming from the White House and the seat of Congress, the Capitol. But they also should remember that these buildings and many more are built by slave labour and they stand high as substantial heritage of slavery of American civilization in the New World. Barria Carlos and Makini Brice talk about grand buildings constructed by skilled slaves, the quote is taken from web source:

Throughout the United States, the physical legacy of slavery can still be seen in the U.S. Capitol, the White House, the residences of former presidents including George Washington's Mount Vernon and James Madison's Montpelier and universities built using the labor of slaves. (Barria web)

American Civil War ended slavery in United States of America but rooted racism created unrest. Laws of the country cannot bring change within individuals but to end racism the change should come from within majority people who are the whites in American society to make a great nation greater.

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