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## **Construction of Gender Identity in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave***

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### **Abstract:**

Plantation slavery facilitated the belief that the slaves were not men, evident in the whites calling the black 'boy.' White masculinity defined manhood as the ability to exercise violence against black men and women who were mythologized as the cultural others. Furthermore, the very nature of slavery as bonded labor and serfdom ensured that the slave could never access these definitions of masculinity. The slave narrative as black autobiography portrays empowering versions of blackness and functions as resistance discourse. Frederick Douglass' autobiography *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*—interpreted predominately as mimicking and reinforcing white versions of masculinity—presents the heterogeneity of black manhood during slavery. Douglass carefully crafts himself as a hero, caregiver, and a trickster, which Edward Baptist explores as narratives of black masculinity in antebellum America, emerging in plantation slavery as responses to white racist discourses.

**Keywords:** African American literature, Frederick Douglass, slavery, slave narrative, black masculinity, Harriet Jacobs, Edward E Baptist, bell hooks, Jeffery B Leak, Barbara McDowell, Charles T Davis, Henry Louis Gates.

### **The Black 'Boys': White Discussions of Black Masculinity During Slavery and After.**

Plantation slavery facilitated the belief that slaves were not men, evident in the whites calling the black 'boy.' Significantly, even after emancipation, white scholarship continued viewing black men and women through racist lenses, using their subjugation and exploitation during slavery as both cause and evidence of their inadequacy as men and women. Aligning masculinity with patriarchy, Franklin Frazier (1939), Kenneth Stampp (1956), Stanley Elkins (1959), and Daniel Moynihan (1965) identified black men as emasculated within predominately matriarchal black family. Consider, for example, the sociologist Franklin Frazier (1939) who argues that black families are matrifocal because black men could not function as patriarchs during slavery; they could neither protect nor provide; their only role was to produce children. Frazier's arguments are supported by sociologists such as Kenneth Stampp and Stanley Elkins, and Daniel Moynihan.

The destructive nature of considering black men as emasculated is evident in Daniel Moynihan's government funded report that now blamed black women as imprisoning black masculinity. Moynihan argues that since slavery forced black families to be matrilineal, black

men could not cope with self-sufficient black women who functioned as the provider; consequently, they felt inadequate playing the roles of husband and fathers and deserted their families. In early 1970s revisionist historians such as Eugene Genovese and John Blassingame argue against Moynihan's thesis. They deny that black families were matriarchal, emphasizing that black men sought to protect their families in slavery and were good fathers to their children. However, their discussion glosses over the gender oppression experienced by black men and women in slavery, which Orlando Patterson (1990) centralises through the questions he asks of black masculinity:

Could he [the black man] monopolize his partner's sexual services and guarantee that her progeny were in fact his own? Could he protect her from the sexual predation of other men? Could he at least partly provide for her materially? Could he prevent her from being brutalized and physically punished by other men? Could he prevent her from being torn from the place where she was brought up, bundled like cargo, and sold away from him, her children, her kinsmen, and her friends? If the answer to any of these questions is "No," the role of the husband did not exist. If the slave could do none of these things, then the role of the husband had been devastated. (32)

Patterson concludes that slavery reduced black men and women in law and social custom to "nonperson" (27).

### **Ain't I a Man?: The Solitary Slave as a Hero, Caregiver, and Trickster in Douglass' Slave Narrative.**

The black autobiography during slavery—the slave narrative—emerges as a resistance discourse asserting empowering versions of blackness and therefore is significant in any discussions of the black manhood during slavery and after. As a literary form, slave narrative arose to refute white claims that blacks did not have the human intelligence to be literate and hence were not people. As Charles T Davis and Henry Louis Gates (1985) assert, slave narrative as a body of writing was used by the black slave to proclaim "himself a human being" (xii). The typical slave narrative involves the slave's journey from enslavement to freedom. It presents realistic descriptions of the oppressive nature of slavery and records the slave's struggle to escape slavery. The journal *Putnam Monthly* (1855) reviewing the ex-slave Frederick Douglass' famous autobiography *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) sums it up thusly:

Our English literature has recorded many an example of genius struggling against adversity ... yet none of these are so impressive as the case of solitary slave, in a remote district, surrounded by none but enemies, conceiving the project of his escape, teaching himself to read and write to facilitate it, accomplishing it at last, and subsequently raising himself to a leadership in a great movement on behalf of his brethren. (qtd. in Davis and Gates xvii)

The cited extract highlights Douglass' narrative as an exemplary slave narrative that pairs slavery and ignorance, legal freedom and literacy, as well as emancipation and masculinity. To follow *Putnam Monthly*, Douglass transforms into a man from a slave when he faces his enemies, pursues freedom, and later writes his struggle to help other fellow slaves, thereby serving the abolitionist cause. Clearly, the slave narrative centralizes the slave's human

identity; it constructs the slave's gender identity as a man or women in slavery and inspite of slavery.

However, what does manhood signify for Douglass? This essay explores this question and examines the view posited by bell hooks (2004), Jeffery B Leak (2005), and Deborah E McDowell (1993) that Douglass mimicked and reinforced white definitions of masculinity. The essay asserts the heterogeneity of black masculinity in plantation slavery and suggests that contesting the white racist view of black emasculation, Douglass carefully crafts himself as a hero, caregiver, and a trickster. These identarian categories, which Edward Baptist explores as narratives of black masculinity in antebellum America, emerged in plantation slavery as a response to the white propaganda regarding black masculinity.

In his work "The Absent Subject: African American Masculinity and Forced Migration to the Antebellum Plantation Frontier," Baptist explicates the politics of white plantation masculinity. He observes:

The denial of black manhood was central to white manhood....In fact, concepts of white manliness that structured households ... and authorized violence depended upon the disempowerment of blackness. By claiming manly self restraint, in supposed contrast to the alleged profligacy of slaves and men of color, the Irish and others became white. The ability to exercise violence, often sexual in nature, against women of color made other males into dominating white men .... (137)

Baptist suggests that white masculinity was constructed by othering black masculinity. The economics and social norms of the plantation culture depended upon this disempowering act. Since the plantation culture survived upon the bonded labor of black men and women, the cultural grammar of the white plantation supported the economic needs of the plantation by purporting the myth of black men as subhuman. The ideology of white southern masculinity nourished this myth and sought to prove in practice that blacks were not men. Black men could not own property, could not have families, and could not save black women from abuse and rape. Most importantly, black men were commodities to be bought and sold. Baptist states, "[u]biquitous fiction held that the ability to commodify others meant that one was a man, and to be commodified meant that one was not" (143). It is clear that white masculinity defined manhood as freedom and exercise of honour inherent in the ability to protect the dependants or die in the effort. White manhood was also the ability to exercise violence against the black men and women who were mythologized as the cultural others. Furthermore, the very nature of slavery as bonded labor and serfdom ensured that the slave could never access these definitions of masculinity.

Baptist suggests that the construction of black masculinity in plantation culture was in part a response to white myths about black masculinity. This is most evident in the evolution of the black plantation slave as a Todorovian hero. Baptist borrows Todorov's idea of heroism and defines black men who show "a willingness to die for abstracted ideals like glory, honor, and freedom" (Baptist 145) as performing the roles of the Todorovian hero. Since white culture saw slavery as synonymous with emasculated masculinity, the ability and desire to fight and die for freedom became a sign of black manhood. Here the black man functions

as the tragic hero who risks death to fight for his life as a man. Thus, enacting the Todorovian hero, the black man seeks to access the essentialist definition of the white masculinity as freedom and honor.

However, the hero could not be a universal model because not every slave had the willingness to die in pursuit of freedom. This gave rise to the black man as the caregiver and the trickster. The white slave master often used different means of persuasion other than death to control the slaves. For example, the slave master could threaten to separate an enslaved black from his family. This threat, which was very real, was horrifying enough to control the black masculine urge to be the hero. These conditions gave birth to the man of “ordinary virtues” (Baptist 146) who resisted the notion of courting death in quest for liberty and honor. The man of “ordinary virtues” was the slave who took the role of the caregiver in the community. As the caregiver, the slave became the nurse to the fellow sick slave. If the slave was literate, oftentimes he covertly established a Sunday school to teach his fellow slaves to read the Bible. Baptist states:

Enslaved men display dignity by subjecting their own acts to a higher moral code. They also carry out acts of caring. And while Western societies have traditionally associated heroism with masculinity, and caring with femininity, it does not follow that enslaved men considered caring feminine. Although depicted as objects stripped of claims to masculinity, many enslaved men stubbornly demonstrated through acts of caretaking and dignity that they believed that their own lives and identities mattered, and they had choices and will. (147)

The slave choosing to serve the community rather than fleeing for freedom shows a concept of masculinity unfamiliar to white masculinity. While his captive state makes him unmanly in white plantation culture, the slave’s act of serving his community shows him to be a worthy human being and hence, a man. This deliberate self-fashioning by black men as caregivers is a radical act of resistance to the racist gender discourses. It subverts white masculinity because it departs from the white definition of masculinity as physical aggression. The black slave as the caregiver establishes a more humane and spiritual definition of masculinity.

In contrast to the black man as hero and caregiver, there exists a third form of black masculinity: the black man as the trickster. The trickster figure in plantation culture adopted the method of outward compliance that was a cover for their true intentions. They avoided the confrontational tactics of the hero, rather depending on guile to achieve their aim. The trickster figure then is the intermediary figure between the black man as the hero and black man as the care-giver. The trickster partakes of the reluctance or inability of the caregiver figure to oppose white plantation patriarchy openly and risk death. At the same time, like the hero, the trickster opposes the slave master; only, the rebellion instead of being overt is covert.

Clearly, most black men in plantation culture could adopt two or more variations of black masculinity simultaneously. Moreover, all the forms of black masculinity--the hero, the caregiver and the trickster--embody rebellion against white patriarchal masculinity. The black man as the hero seemingly pursues the objectives of white masculinity—honour and liberty.

This search for freedom and honour disproves the white myth of black masculinity as effeminate. The black man as the caregiver renders false the white myth of black masculinity as violent, while the trickster figure establishes the black man as cunning enough to trick the superior white man. Being aware of white masculinity, black masculinity utilized and reacted against the cultural narrative of white masculinity.

Contemporary criticism, however, persists in viewing black slave masculinity only as an imitation of white plantation masculinity. A good example of this is Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself*. bell hooks in "Reconstructing Black Masculinity" states, "Frederick Douglass did not feel his manhood affirmed by intellectual progress. It was affirmed when he fought man to man with the slave overseer" (qtd. *We Real Cool* 3). Jeffery B. Leak in *Racial Myths and Masculinity* presents a variation of hooks' argument:

As heroic as Douglass emerges after his battle with the slave-breaker Edward Covey—one in which he acts in self defense—Douglass' self-fashioned image emerges in relation to the myth of the violence-charged black male, a variation on the myth of black inferiority....For Douglass, there exists a correlation between his physical defense and his manhood, as he perceives the rebirth of his manhood through violence. (11)

Leak is implying that Douglass is reinforcing the myth of black masculinity as primitive, thereby playing into white supremacist cultural assumptions. In addition, like hooks, Leak is also suggesting that by linking physical violence for self-protection to manhood, Douglass is also imitating white patriarchy, which found physical violence for self-defense acceptable in context of white masculinity. By characterizing Douglass as an imitator, both hooks and Leak ignore textual evidence in the *Narrative* that presents Douglass' masculinity as a composite of the trickster, the Todorovian hero and the caregiver. Then, in order to establish his identity as a black man, is Douglass showing his awareness of white patriarchal masculinity and subverting it?

In the *Narrative* Douglass wears the guise of the trickster in his pursuit of literacy. In addition, his pursuit of literacy is not only a covert rebellion against slavery but also serves to prove false the myth of black intellectual inferiority. Douglass juxtaposes his desire to learn reading and writing with the concept of freedom. Mrs. Sophia Auld—the white woman whose house slave Douglass was in Baltimore—had initially sought to make Douglass literate. Her husband condemned this endeavor by suggesting that literacy is a dangerous acquisition for a slave as it will make him "discontent" and "unfit to be a slave" (Douglass 303). Mr. Auld links slavery with illiteracy, thus suggesting explicitly the integral relationship between literacy and freedom. Douglass, too, reiterates this positive connection between literacy and liberty when he terms "wit" as the "white man's power to enslave the black man" (Douglass 303). Since, slavery was equivalent to emasculation and dehumanization, the desire to read and write becomes the metaphor for Douglass' assertion of masculinity and subjectivity. Douglass is aware that the desire of a slave to learn letters is a mark of sedition and punishable by law. Yet, when thwarted by Mr. Auld and eventually Mrs. Auld, Douglass persists in his attempts to learn writing. He uses various stratagems such as practicing writing

in stealth and bribing poor white boys with food to utilize their services as writing teachers. Douglass' efforts to educate himself, then, are an assertion of his masculinity. White masculinity asserted that the slave/beast is inferior intellectually due to their inability to read or write. By establishing himself as literate in his quest for masculinity/human identity, Douglass is proving white myth of black inferiority as wrong. Douglass is rebelling against the draconian prescriptions of white culture and legal system that is deliberately keeping him illiterate and utilising his lack as evidence of black intellectual inferiority. However, Douglass does not openly rebel against Mr. and Mrs. Auld. He outwardly presents a face of compliance to their dictates against literacy while covertly learning to read and write. Douglass, therefore, adopts the role of trickster to avoid direct confrontation with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, thus, renouncing at this point of time the role of the Todorovian hero.

Later in the work, Douglass takes up the role of the Todorovian hero in his confrontation with Covey. This passage is one of the most celebrated in the *Narrative*. Covey is presented as the slave breaker, a man known for his cruelty towards slaves. Douglass presents Covey as the "artful deceiver" (334), suggesting Covey to be the master who would see through the slave-trickster. Therefore, to best Covey, Douglass uses force and adopts the guise of the Todorovian hero who will die for his principles. Douglass describes his fight with Covey thusly:

I resolved to fight; and suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance...We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go.... (330)

hooks and Leak, as suggested previously, consider this incident with Covey to be of primary importance. They suggest that Douglass mimics white plantation patriarchy in this episode. However, they ignore the transmutation of aggressive violence, characteristic of white patriarchy, into defensive violence that, in Douglass' case, is the sign of black masculinity. Douglass is not the aggressor with respect to Covey. Douglass is merely defending himself from oppression. The right to self-defense is a sign of free man admissible in legal system. Furthermore, it is not Douglass but Covey who "let[s]" Douglass go, thereby suggesting that in the fight Covey was the bully and Douglass the noble defender. And, like all bullies Covey caves in at the sign of resistance. It should be noted that Douglass does not attempt to beat or injure Covey during the fight; Douglass holds Covey by the throat and seeks to prevent Covey from doing him injury.

bell hooks has concentrated on Douglass' assertion that the fight made him a man. Douglass' own assertions, while seemingly giving credence to hooks' opinion, implicitly suggest the incident to be a major marker in Douglass' construction of masculinity, but not the main one. Douglass states:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determina-

tion to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. (331)

The speech gives evidence that Douglass adopts the role of the Todorovian hero in his fight with Covey. However, this is only one role among many that he adopts in the course of his narrative. The word “rekindled” suggests the episode with Covey as not the sole proof of his masculinity. Had it been so, Douglass would have said that the battle with Covey kindled and commenced, not “rekindled” and “revived” a sense of masculinity. The battle with Covey then becomes a major development but not the sole marker of Douglass’ masculinity. The fight with Covey is discussed by Douglass as a sign of maleness because of the nature of the event. The use of violence for self-protection is considered an important marker of masculinity, and Douglass’ ability to protect himself from Covey, who is symbolic of white plantation masculinity, is the most overt evidence of Douglass’ status as male and not an emasculated slave.

Douglass’ severe condemnation of white patriarchy in the *Narrative* also contests critical readings that indicate Douglas slavishly imitating narratives of white masculinity. Douglass presents white patriarchy as a sadistic and spiritually corrupting practice. Presenting himself as the unacknowledged child of his white master, thereby following the discourses of abolition literature that interrogates slavery as immoral, Douglas implicitly critiques slavery as a culture where the son is also the slave. The *Narrative* abounds in depiction of white cruelty towards black slaves, thus questioning the humanity of the slave owners. The white religion also is seen as a perversion of worship; Douglass time and again exposes the cruelty of pious white men and women against the slaves. The contrast is most clearly presented in the case of Captain Thomas Auld whose “house was the house of prayer” and who “starved” the slaves while he “stuffed” his fellow church members (Douglass 318). Also, the God-fearing Captain Auld could mercilessly whip the female slave Henny because of a slight infraction. The only white people shown not using the whip are Mr. and Mrs. Auld. However, Douglass describes Mrs. Auld as a “demon” (303) and a “tiger” (306), ascribing male qualities to her and divesting her of her femininity. Since Douglass sees Mrs. Auld as having male qualities because of her involvement with slavery, he is explicitly suggesting slavery to be a function of white plantation masculinity. Douglass then ascribes negative connotations to white plantation masculinity and links it with oppression.

These condemnatory depictions of white masculinity indicates that Douglass seeks alternative and humane models of being a man. Douglass, having established himself as a wily trickster and a man of strength, seeks to present himself as the caregiver. He does not hoard his knowledge of letters but disperses it into the black slave community. He opens a Sunday school with the aim of teaching his fellow slaves. Through this act, Douglas fashions his self as a reformer who is motivated by love for his people and an awareness of his and his community’s worthiness. However, Douglass’ role as the caregiver is limited when compared to his role as a trickster and a Todorovian hero. This is so because while Douglass attempts to present himself as a community man, he is more comfortable presenting himself as an individual and a self-made man. For example, Douglass presents himself as solely responsible for his successful escape to New York and freedom: “I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching

New York without the slightest interruptions of any kind” (355). This is in contrast to the female slave narratives such as Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) that acknowledges the role slave community and abolitionists play in aiding fugitive slaves to freedom. The role of the Todorovian hero and the trickster are traits of individualist masculinity because of their reliance on the individual’s intellectual and physical resources. Douglass strives to present himself as a well-rounded man, who seeks freedom and is truly honorable because of his practice of (non-aggressive) defensive violence, and who is also a caregiver for his society.

In conclusion, Douglass’ *Narrative* challenges the white racist discourses prevalent during slavery and after that portray black men as emasculated. Admittedly, the white man’s law did not allow blacks to be husbands and fathers—roles which predominately describe manhood. However, Douglass evidences in his life-writing the resourcefulness exhibited by black men to find and construct alternative definitions of masculinity based on honor, liberty, intellect, care, and ethics. Douglass’ work thus remains a canonical text with regard to black autobiography and black masculinity studies. It asks us to condemn oppression and inspires us to view resistance as diverse in nature—as overt and covert, often voiced, but also present in silence.

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