



The Double Burden: Sexual Violence and Racial Discrimination of Black African American Women

Navneet Kumar Sonkar

Research Scholar,

Department of English & Modern European Languages,

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj.

navneetsonkar3588@gmail.com

Prof. Susheel Kumar Sharma

Professor,

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj.

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.22>

Abstract:

This article focuses on the suffering and exploitation of Black women under the system of slavery. American slavery was one of the cruellest and darkest chapters of American history, where millions of Black people were subjugated and marginalised. The article points out how women were sexually exploited and discriminated against because of their colour and race. African American literature includes autobiographical narrative which represents the lives and suffering of enslaved black people under slavery. Many African American authors portrayed the picture of slavery in their writing. The autobiographical narrative became the most popular genre among African American writers, in which they not only discuss their personal lives but also explain the lives of those with whom they were living. The life of Black enslaved women under slavery was very difficult; they were not only exploited as women but also discriminated against based on their race and colour. They carried a double burden of exploitation. Their lives were more difficult than men's; they had to struggle more to get freedom and rights. So, many autobiographies have been written by male and female authors that discuss the lives of Black women. Through textual analysis, we explore the issues of sexual violence and racial discrimination.

Keywords: Slavery, subjugation, marginalised, gender violence, and black enslaved.

Introduction:

Slavery was not always as it was in America. American slavery was profit-oriented commerce, and trade was the main source of income for the colonisers. After colonising America, they began producing cash crops like sugar, cotton, and tobacco. The demand for these crops was so high in the European Market. They needed more hands to work on the plantations. They began to import Black people from different regions of West Africa. The demand for enslaved African people in America was so high because they were fit for work on cotton and sugar plantations, and their cost was also very cheap. Twelve million enslaved people were forcibly transported from Africa to America during the Middle Passage. When these slaves reached America, they faced new difficulties of starvation, poverty, and subjugation. They faced social and racial marginalisation, which made them others in the same society. Their social and cultural identities were erased; they were separated from their family and relatives. The lives of enslaved women were more difficult than those of men; they bore the double burden of work. They faced double subjugation because of their race and gender; they had no legal rights to protect themselves against the cruelty of their masters. Their voice was always suppressed by cruel punishment. Very few women succeeded in running away and obtaining legal manumission because women had no source of earning except reward money or a token gift.

African-American literature represents the history of Africa and the lives of slaves under slavery. From a literary viewpoint, the autobiographical narratives of formerly enslaved people encompass one of the most extensive and influential traditions in African-American literature. The first slave narrative, which provided insight into slave ships and trade, was *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by Himself*, published in 1789. During the Antebellum Period, so many autobiographical narratives were produced that depicted the life of enslaved Americans under slavery. Charles Ball's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (1837) covers the brutal treatment

of slaves under slavery, such as family separation, poverty, hunger, and sexual exploitation of enslaved women. Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (1849) recounts his personal life as he struggles for freedom from the bondage of slavery. Austin Steward's *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Free Man* (1867) exposes the brutal system of slavery and the survival strategies of the slaves under slavery. Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1855) was a world-famous slave narrative that portrayed the life of the free black negro who was kidnapped and sold into slavery. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* 1861, discusses the issues of racial discrimination and the suffering of enslaved women under slavery.

These narratives not only discuss the personal life of the author but also cover the lives of other fellow enslaved people who were facing the same trauma in their lives. They also discuss the lives of women under slavery. The article is a collective study of the autobiographies that were written during the antebellum period and explores the theme of sexual exploitation and racial discrimination of Black women during slavery through textual analyses that explore all those issues; it shows that Black women carried a double burden of suppression.

Under the system of American slavery, Black women were more dominated than men. They had to struggle more than men to get freedom and equality. They faced double exploitation and the burden of work during slavery. They were discriminated against based on their race and gender. On the other hand, white women had all the privileges and rights; they commanded over their slaves, which shows inequality and social marginalisation of enslaved African Black people. The exploitation of Black women begins with the journey of the Middle Passage, where sailors, captains, and traders impose power through sexual exploitation. Seduction and rape provided both pleasure and economic profit. In his document, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* 2007, Marcus Rediker tells how women were assaulted during the

Middle Passage; above the age of thirteen, most of them were pregnant when they reached the coast of America. This pregnancy increased their value in the slave market, where demand for enslaved people was high.

Olaudah Equiano was an eyewitness to the cruelty while he worked on the cargo ship with his master. Equiano often visited different islands for the sale of fresh negros. He recounted in his narrative that the rape of Black women was a common practice on the cargo ship. The captain and clerks of the ship raped Black women against their will. Because being a Black slave, he was not able to take any action against white people. Black people had no authority to save their own family members from punishment and rape because they were property of their masters. He gives an example of unequal justice for whites; he tells us he was an eyewitness when a man in Montserrat was mercilessly beaten and punished because he had an affair with a white woman who was a common prostitute in his society. Equiano reveals there was no justice for Black women and no punishment for white men after robbing Black women of their chastity. However, if a Black man engaged in a relationship with a white woman, despite her being the most marginalized woman within her community, the Black man was regarded as if he had committed a grave offense and was subjected to severe punishment.

After Arrival on the coast of America, the slaves were again sold to different planters who forced them to work on the cotton and sugar plantations. "It was usual for men and women to work side by side on our plantation; and in many kinds of work, the women were compelled to do as much as the men." (Steward 14) Their work was not limited to the plantation; after completing the work, the slaveholders appointed them to perform household work in their houses. However, slaveholders expected much more from slave women and slave girls. They expected to have sexual relationships with their female slaves. They were treated as objects of sex and faced sexual exploitation from all the male members of the slaveholding family. If any

female slaves refused to have sexual relationships with their master, they were threatened or flogged. So many Black women committed suicide to save their chastity.

The Black women performed all the work for their masters and their family members, and after retiring from there, they had to cook food for their family. These women also cooked a mid-day meal for the field labourers and older women who cared for the infant children behind their mothers. Thus, the enslaved women of every age were equally important to the slaveholders. The life of the enslaved on a cotton plantation was more difficult compared to sugar and tobacco plantations because the overseer never allowed slave mothers to go to the house during work to nurse their child, so they carried them in the field. Charles Ball tells in his narrative that he saw early in the morning several women carrying their children in their arms to the field. These mother laid their children at the side of the fence or under the shade of the cotton plants. When they got a little time, they suckled milk to their children. Ball asked one of them, whose name was Lydia, who tied her child with linen clothes upon her back. Why she did not do as others did, she replied, "I cannot leave my child in the weeds amongst the snakes. What would be my feelings if I should have leave it there, and a scorpion were bite it? Besides, my child cries so piteously, when I have it alone in the field, that I cannot bear to hear it. Poor thing, I wish we were both in grave, where all sorrow is forgotten"(151).

Women had always feared losing their children; masters deliberately separated children from their mothers so that they would perform better in the field without any resistance. Charles Ball tells of the condition of his mother when he was sold at the age of four years. Her mother held him in her arms and wept loudly. The buyer carried him away from his mother, then she turned to him and requested, " Oh master, do not take me from my child!" (17). Solomon Northup also tells the story of Eliza, who had two children; the son was Randall and the daughter Emily. Eliza spent very little time with her son Randall, who was very little when he was sold. The next day, Eliza was also sold to Freeman, although she requested that

he purchase Emily with her; but the master refused to sell Emily. When Freeman asked the reason, the master replied he would sell her after a few years at a high price; several men in New Orleans would give five thousand for her. “When slaves were sold, families were often divided- husband from wife, parents from children- with little regard given to keeping a family together if higher profits were possible by selling them separately”(Sylvester 145). Separation of the family was also used as a mechanism to control the slaves. The family members provided one another emotional support and resisted the cruelty of their master.

Life for the women became more difficult under slavery after separation from their family and husband. The wives of runaway enslaved people were often sold into adultery so that the slaveholder could recover his money from them, and the children born from them legally belonged to the slaveholders. Henry Bibb shares his own experience of life when his wife was sold for adultery. He said that when he was imprisoned, his master sold his wife to Madison Garrison. Malinda had limited choice; either she saved her daughter or accepted sexual relations with Garrison. And she had no other option to save her daughter, so she had to have sex with Garrison. However, he tried more to save his wife, Malinda, and daughter, Mary Frances, from the bondage of slavery; when he knew that she had sexual relations with her present owner, he abandoned her. “She has ever since been regarded as theoretically and practically dead to me as a wife, for she was living in a state of adultery, according to the law of God and man”(189). Amy Lewis writes an article, “Who Will Speak for Malinda? In his article, he discusses who will speak for the injustice and exploitation against Malinda. She always tried to save her family; ultimately, she had to surrender before the power of slaveholders. Moreover, her own husband, who was his companion and protector, left her when she needed him most.

Lydia was a housekeeper who was not accustomed to working in the field. She had no experience with agricultural work; she was often whipped by the overseer. “When a new hand,

one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can”(Northup 165). She was facing multiple challenges in her life: the overseer whipped her because she was not strong enough to do work in the group with other enslaved women, while her husband beat her and kept her hungry when she asked for help from the overseer; he refused to, saying that he never interfered in family disputes. Black women faced the cruelty of their masters as well as domestic violence, where they were beaten and punished by their own protectors.

Linder O Douglas wrote an essay, “Celia’s Trial,” about a woman who killed his master, Newsom. Robert Newsom was a middle-aged farmer belonging to Callaway County, Missouri. In 1850, he purchased a fourteen-year-old slave girl named Celia. After a few days, he raped her, and over the next five years, he repeatedly raped her. She became the mother of her children, although she told Newsom's daughters about this, but they did not take any action against Newsom. One night, when Newsom came to her cabin, Celia hit him twice on the head, and he died. Celia was arrested and summoned for trial. The court said that enslaved women had no legal rights to protect themselves against sexual violence. All the white jurors sentenced her to be hanged until death. She was executed on December 21, 1855. Celia’s trial shows that there was no legal protection for enslaved women against sexual violence.

Henry Bibb explains a similar incident when he was sold to Whitfield, a planter in Louisiana. Bibb described a young girl whom Whitfield purchased to be the wife of his son. At first, she resisted making sexual relations with her master’s son because she did not like him, but she was forced by lash and threat to have sex with him. Sexual relations between negro women and white men often gave birth to biracial children called mulatto. According to the law of slavery, the children of the enslaved mother were born as enslaved, so the mulattos were also slaved. “Some historians point to the large number of mulattoes slave and free, as a sad testimony to the sexual abuse of black women slaves in antebellum America”(Slyvester 147).

Sexual relations between masters and Black women were not only for satisfying physical needs but also profitable for them, so there was no law against this cruelty. The master often forced enslaved women into sex with his relatives, guests, and other members of the family, after the end of the legal international slave trade in 1808 in the United States of America. Natural childbirth among Black African supplemented the demand for enslaved people. This idea of natural increase in the number of enslaved people developed the domestic slave trade in the Americas by the end of the 18th century. Slave holders in the North and South encouraged enslaved women to have more children, and some of them even promised freedom to the enslaved women if they bore a certain number of children. An enslaved woman was forced to bear thirteen to fourteen children in her life. Due to a lack of medical facilities, the death rate of women was so high; women often died while giving birth. The experience of slavery for the enslaved women was so bitter. Many enslaved women committed suicide; some killed their children so that they would not face the same cruelty that they faced. Toni Morrison writes in her novel *Beloved* that Sethe killed her daughter because she did not want her daughter to face the cruelty of the master. Lydia, who was not sad after the death of her daughter, rejoiced that her child was dead and free from the world of slavery and wretchedness.

The women were not less punished than men for the same crime; they were punished as severely as men. In his narrative, Solomon explains that the master whipped Patsey because she went to Harriet without his permission, and when she returned, found her master in fearful rage. The master stripped off her clothes and tied her to a stake. He whipped her until the flesh was cut down from her back. The mistress was standing nearby and was forced to be whipped hard. The command of her mistress over the master shows the power of white women. Black women faced cruelty because of their different race, but at the same time, white women in positions of domestic authority reinforced racial hierarchies, exercising power over Black women and deepening their marginalisation. Race determined social stratification in America,

creating a rigid hierarchy that excluded Americans slaves from citizenship, education, and property ownership. “Nothing upon which they can pride themselves, except that they were white men, and are obliged to work for a living” (Ball 287). Whites occupied the highest place in social hierarchy, enjoying full rights and privileges, while free Black people existed in a precarious middle ground, constantly threatened by legal and social exclusion. The narratives of Charles Ball, Henry Bibb, and Austin Steward explain the gender and racial discrimination. They show that white women held the central position in white society; they also had equal rights and authority as men. Some mistresses controlled their men and enslaved people. Charles Ball's mistress whipped him with her brother, while Bibb's mistress flogged, pulled his ears, and scolded him daily. Steward's mistress, Mrs Helm, herself punished her slaves by striking them over the head with a heavy iron key.

Black women had no right to learn to read and write or participate in trade and commerce. While men had less opportunity to participate and earn money, they hired themselves out for work and got wages. Olaudah Equiano began trading with his master and earned money to buy his freedom. Charles Ball and Henry Bibb hired themselves out after running away and earned money. “I hired myself at the American Hotel to a Mr McCoy to do the work of a porter, to black boots, & c., for which he was to pay me \$12 per month”(Bibb 170). This racial and gender discrimination blocked African American women's path to freedom. Very few women got legal manumission in their lives, but most of them spent their whole lives on the plantation under the cruelty of slavery. Thus, the path of freedom for Black women was full of difficulties; they resisted not only the systemic violence of slavery but also the gendered prejudices that sought to silence their voice and erase their humanity. The women who succeeded in running away wrote their autobiographies and explored the cruelty against women.

Conclusion:

American slavery after colonisation became one of the most profitable businesses of European countries. Many European countries established their colony in America and used slaves in the production of raw materials. Black African slaves were forcefully captured from their native region and forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean. Black Africans people were denied their human and fundamental rights, and their legal status, identity, and autonomy were stripped away. Enslaved Black Africans were discriminated against because of their colour and race. In the case of Black women, they were victims of double oppression; they were not only discriminated against because of their race and colour but also sexually assaulted. These Assaults were not only acts of violence but also tools of control, reinforcing the enslaver's dominance and perpetuating cycles of trauma. Furthermore, enslaved women's reproductive capacities were exploited for economic gain. Children born to enslaved mothers inherited their mothers' status, ensuring a self-reproducing labour force.

Works Cited:

- Ball, Charles. *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man*. John S. Taylor, 1837.
- Bibb, Henry. *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*. Macdonald & Lee, 1849.
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa*. W. Cock, 1816.
- Lewis, Amy. "Who'll Speak for Malinda?" *African American Review*, vol.52, no.3, Fall 2019, pp.255-276. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26795209>

Linder, O. Douglas. "The Trial of Celia, a Slave." *Famous Trials*, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, 2007, https://famous-trials.com/celia/180-home?__

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2005.

Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855.

Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. Viking, 2007.

<https://copilot.microsoft.com/Steward>, Austin. *Twenty Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman*. 4th ed., 1867.

Sylvester, M. Theodore. *Slavery Throughout History, Almanac*. U.X.L., 1999.