

The literary representation of the resilience of the slave family and familial relations in Frederick Douglass' autobiography

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is to make an exploration of the literary representation of the black family under slavery. How the family fared under the peculiar institution of slavery was determined by the social system of the Old South that determined how and to whom goods were produced, to satisfy human wants. An exploration of this capitalist patriarchal ideology shows that the slave was objectified for economic gains, this causing a severe impact on the slaves' familial relations. Therefore, it is the slave who can give an objective account of how the slave family fared under slavery, which resulted in the slave narrative being labelled "the" mode of expression during that time. The narrative by Douglass has therefore demonstrated that slavery certainly was a horror to the slaves but the resilience of the slaves, their fortitude and inner strength made them to survive and keep their families intact. In the final analysis it has been made clear that despite all the odds against it, the slave family survived the horrors of slavery.

Introduction and Background

The aim of this paper is to explore the literary representations of the resilience of the slave family and familial relations in Frederick Douglass's autobiography. Frederick Douglass' narrative is one of the most outstanding slave narratives which have immortalised the horrors of the slave experiences and how the slaves acted and reacted to bondage. However, according to Nichols (1963), there have been charges of doubtful authenticity on slave narratives such that "all autobiographies must be critically evaluated by the accepted standards of historical evidence" (p. xii). He further adds that "another common objection to the slave narrative is the claim that the writers were not representative of the masses of slaves, (p. xix) hence the question "how accurate are the narrators' impressions of the slave holding system?" is central to any analysis of slave narratives. This question therefore calls for a historical presentation of the slave institution and the black family under slavery as a verification of the slave narrative. This will give a clear context of evaluating the hypothesis on the literary representation of familial relations under slavery as being conditioned by the economics of slavery.

The black family in the New World was a direct product of the "notorious triangle"- the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The African slave trade began like a small errant cloud on the horizon. Soon it blotted out the humane influence of the Enlightenment, as the plantation system took root and enriched the empires of the Old World. When, under the capitalist forces of commercial revolution the European countries undertook to develop the New World, they were primarily interested in the exploitation of its natural resources. Labour was obviously necessary, the cheaper the better. The great susceptibility of Indians to

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diseases made them turn to the Africans and the black labour was able to sustain European economies. Largely under the encouragement of Prince Henry, the sailors and merchants of Portugal early saw the economic advantages that the African slave trade afforded.

When in 1517 Bishop Bartholomeo de Las Casas advocated the encouragement of immigration to the New World by permitting Spaniards to import African slaves, the trading of humans into the New World formally began (Houston, 1984). The Europeans took Africans to Europe and made them servants, feeling justified in doing so because Africans would thereby have the opportunity to cast off their heathenism and embrace the Christian religion. Yet when facts are looked directly in the face, scholars repudiate this reason for African enslavement, arguing that the position of the slaves in the triangular trade and the brutality of the enterprise clearly points to a capitalist colonial economy (Gates, 1987). Therefore the economics of slavery is very important to any scholarly exploration of the slave family and the emergence of the slave narrative. Whilst commercial deportation was by and large a tragic disruption of familial relations and African cultural hegemony, Nichols (1963) has argued that "early opposition to the introduction of slaves was not based on any moral scruple but rather on the fear of rebellion" (p.12). The need for labour was so great, cotton culture, especially after the invention of the cotton gin, was so lucrative that the trade flourished.

Slaves constantly experienced, directly or indirectly, the influence of the auction block. Owens (1976, p. 183) argues that activities associated with the slave trade gave many planters a bad name and to avoid public disapproval, some masters sold their bondsman privately. For the slave, however, the impact remained the same, and scenes of mothers crying because they would never see their children again are more than products of historical imagination. The auction block for slaves meant a parting, often final, from "relatives and friends", as Douglass' narratives will show. By all odds, the most brutal aspect of slavery was thus the separation of families. This was a haunting fear which made all of the slave's days miserable. According to Owens, "For this reason Harriet Tubman the Underground Railroad heroine recalled that while she was in bondage, "every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away." (1976, p. 183) The best objective evidence available concerning the separation of males by planters appears in the marriage certificates of former slaves by the Union army and the Freedman's Bureau in Tennessee and Mississippi. They show that 66 percent of unions in Mississippi were broken by masters, 50 per cent in Louisiana and 43 percent in Tennessee (Blassingame, 1979, p. 138). It is thus obvious that the slave family was an extremely precarious institution.

At the centre of the controversy over the slave family is the bondswoman. Her image usually stands in direct contrast to that of the plantation mistress. While her mistress was viewed as pure and dignified, she was tainted and uncouth. The mistress was ethereal and supposedly saintly and pure, whilst the slave woman was all too earthy, issues which prominently feature in Douglas' narratives. Capping the entire contrast was the sensuality supposedly characteristic of slaves: mysterious in its workings, it is thought to make them excellent breeders (as Douglas presents in the Covey incident). This then is consistent with the idea of studding that was meant to ensure economic sustenance through reproduction, an issue that Jacobs explores at great length. Gutman (1976) points out that a certain Virginia woman's uncle gave a small pig to a mother of a newborn child (p. 66). Gutman also believes that slave rearing was the South's leading industry and that its profit lay in keeping slaves healthy and rapidly multiplying. The system put a high premium on child bearing. The owner viewed the birth of a child primarily as an economic fact to be recorded in a ledger, but the slave viewed the same as a social and familial act to be recorded at the back of a Bible (Gutman, 1976, p. 75).

The white man's lust for black women was one of the serious impediments to the development of the black woman's morality, resulting in equally disastrous consequences on the blacks' familial relations. Often through force, white overseers and planters helped themselves with the result of increasing their "stock". As Nichols (1963) puts it, "Moses Roper, Harriet Jacobs, Henry Bibb, Frederick Douglass, William Grimes, William Wells Brown, the Clarke brothers and many others were offspring of white masters" (p. 36). White women were frequently infuriated by their husbands' infidelities in the quarters and took revenge on the black women involved or even tried to kill the child born out of such a relationship.

Love is no small matter for a man and for a slave it represented one of the major crises in his life. Blassingame (1979, p. 146) argues that some slaves vowed never to marry and face separation from loved ones. If they did marry, they desired to marry from another plantation. They did not want to marry a woman from their own and be forced to watch as she was beaten, insulted, raped, overworked or starved without being able to protect her (Blassingame, 1979, p. 142). Unfortunately for most slaves, the master had a final say in regard to their marriage partners. Most slaveholders, feeling that the children their male slaves had by women belonging to other planters was so much seed spewed on the ground, insisted that they marry women on their own estates, so that since the status of the children followed that of the mother, their economic base was broadened. The marriage and family bond endured an additional hardship when masters hired out either partner, an issue evident in Douglass' narrative.

For the young slave, family life was vastly important. His early years somehow slipped past with the idea probably seldom if ever occurring to him that he was but a piece of property. After much consideration Dr Samuel Cartwright of Louisiana noted, "Negro children and white children are alike at birth in one remarkable particularity - they are both white." (In Owens, 1976, p. 202) Frequently the tendency among black and white children was towards a general equality. The pleasures of early childhood and the equality of playmates which transcended colour sometimes obscured the young slave's vision of bondage. Slave narratives relate that often one of the bondsman's earliest recollections of slavery was the sight of his mother or father being whipped or his brothers and sisters standing on the auction block.

Owens (1976) argues that the slave child's early experiences helped to hone him into readiness for but not acceptance of bondage. He might, according to Owens (1976) start his work by picking up a few sticks that cluttered the slave yard and advance to carrying his youthful master's books to school. Owens (1976) also further points that, in the cotton country of the Deep South, children played an important role in the cultivation of the crops. They were widely employed as "weeders" and also gathered bits of cotton. In this way they contributed to the strength of the work force, observed the varied contributions they were to make on a larger scale in the future, and were awakened to the meaning of the economics of slavery to their lives.

In the face of all restrictions, slave parents made every effort humanly possible to shield their children from abuse and teach them how to survive in bondage. One of the most important lessons for the child was learning to hold his tongue around white folks. Also many of the slave parents had to inculcate a sense of morality in their children. Despite the potential of bondage to disrupt the slave family, its members often tried desperately to nurture familial affections. Nichols (1963) argues that when the terms of bondage necessitated the division of families, parents often sought the aid of masters to reunite them. The slave family was also a unit with extensions. Quite often it seems to have consisted of more than just parents and their natural children. It could include a number of blood or adopted relations: uncles, aunts and cousins who lived on the same plantation or on nearby estates.

If the foregoing discussion on the slave family under slavery is a picture factually and realistically painted by scholars (historians and sociologists), it should therefore provide a skeletal framework to test the argument as to how far applicable this ideological phenomenon is represented by the hypothesis on the genre called slave narratives. More than one hundred slave narratives were published before the end of the Civil War and Marion Starling. (In McDowell & Rampersand, 1987, p. iii) has estimated that “over six thousands former slaves left behind their stories of bondage and freedom.” My thesis is to show that as a literary text, the slave narrative owes its emergence and ideological make up from the economics of slavery as also shown by its abolitionist appeal. For the antebellum slave narrative was thus a product of fugitive bondsmen who rejected the authority of their master. What the slave rebel seeks in his flight to the North is much more than an existential alternative to the no-being of slavery (McDowell & Rampersand, 1987, p. 65). The quest is for an idea of freedom, a freedom that sees him negotiating the economics of slavery and also reconstituting familial relations free of the economic machine of slavery.

Familial relations in Douglass' *narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*

When in 1845, fuelled by the socio-economic ideological parameters of slavery, Frederick Douglass wrote the all-time literary classic *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American slave*, a landmark literary contribution was hatched in unveiling the true picture of the peculiar institution of slavery. Perhaps the most powerful and influential black American of his time, Douglass embodied the tumultuous social changes that transformed the United States in the nineteenth century. He came into manhood in a reform conscious age, from which he was not slow to take his cue. This autobiography, which furnished Douglass with his passport to prominence, belonged to a distinctive genre “the heroic fugitive” school of American Literature.

A product of its age, the *Narrative* is an American book in theme, in tone and in spirit. If the autobiographical forms in English and in French assumed narrative priority towards the eighteenth century shaped principally around military exploits, court intrigues and spiritual quests, the prime motivation in slave narratives is “the economics of slavery”. The antebellum slave narrative was the product of fugitive bondsmen who rejected the authority of masters and their socialization as slaves and broke away, often violently, from slavery (McDowell & Rampersand, 1987, p. 64). This is the fold in which we find Douglass' narrative which by many standards ranks supreme to his contemporaries. Douglass' own experiences as a former slave formed the economic milieu of his day. A leading scholar in African-American literature Gates (1987) says that “within the first years after its appearance, a total of some thirty thousand copies of the narrative had been published in the English-speaking world” (p. 83).

The wide sale and distribution of the Douglass narrative marked it as one of the most influential pieces of reform propaganda. Gates (1987), further states that its “initial edition of five thousand copies was such an immediate sensation, inflaming antislavery sentiments in the North and abroad (p. 86), it ultimately forms the best literary representation of the “familial relations” of that class of people defined by the commercial order in southern plantations as chattels. For a clear critical exploration of the topic in Douglass' narratives, two major outlines can be delineated. First we have the life of the growing Douglass as he gets initiated into slavery and then second, the rising consciousness of the slave and his ultimate reconstitution as he takes control of the economic terms of existence. This is the underlying philosophy that finds fullest expression as we get into the text itself, ultimately culminating in an expose of the familial relations in the economics of slavery. As the narrative opens, we are confronted with the young Douglass, the first person

narrator, making an existential claim, setting in motion his quest for being in relation to his fellow beings, his surroundings and the schemes of things as ordained by the aristocratic patriarchies of the plantation system. What seems to reign supreme from the onset is the aberration of normalcy born out of economic paternalism which ultimately results in a dichotomous, Manichean or binary ordering of life. On the one side we have the world of the slave who gropes about trying to spell out who he is and in quest for the natural familial relations that any normal being desires. On the other hand we have the ever looming world of the planter, the master of deprivation, who denies the slaves their humanity and thus, being some other specimen of life, their chattel existence is for the sustenance of the economics of the plantation as an industrial enterprise.

"I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough ..." this straightforward, unornamented presentation with which the narrative opens is more telling than what meets the eye. It is detailed and realistic; bordering on the spheres of graphic realism, yet on a larger symbolic structure what seems to be at the core is that it is only the physical circumstances of his birth that Douglass knows. Knowledge, that cultural commodity that comes through socialization, is limited to those aspects which are physical, which he can simply see as if he were simply a little more than a brute. It is the denial of his date of birth that not only irks him particularly but also awakens him to the realisation of whom his relations are; his fellow slaves. Douglass takes note of the connection that exists not necessarily between him and other slaves, but more profoundly being that next to them in kinship ties were the horses. More striking was the realisation of the great chasm that existed between him and the white children who could tell their ages. Therefore the quest for identity and the deprivation of it by the master has created that gap in the slave's imagination between self and the other, between lord and bondsman, black and white and above all, it has created an apparent likeness between the slave and the plantation animals; a typical ordering of familial relations dictated by the economics of plantation culture. This state of disequilibrium - this absence of choice motivates the slave's search for his humanity as well as Douglass' search for his text, the text that will come to stand for his life in the form of an autobiography.

Moreover, the deprivation that so disturbs him is not an accidental one; "it is the wish of masters within (his) knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant" (Douglass, 1945, p. 11). Masters therefore become owners of "knowledge" while slaves are the "ignorant", a dichotomous ordering of the slave's understanding of himself and of his relation to the world through the system of the perceptions that defined the world the planters made. The agrarian environment introduced by the narrator's dry quip about the slave and the horse as in the same condition is further established by the enumeration of the slave's year: "planting-time", "harvest-time", "cherry-time", "spring-time" and "fall-time". What is evident here is that the slaves' language is informed by the means of production, the agrarian mercantilism that has a social grounding in commercial separation and the young Douglass, socialised in that environment, cannot but through literary creativity show the codes conditioned by such a historical discourse. As if not knowing his date of birth were not bad enough, Douglass shows us that there was also deprivation of the parental knowledge. As an animal would know its mother only, so Douglass knows his, while the father is some indefinite "white man", suggested through innuendo to be his master. For Douglass, the bonds of blood kinship are the primary metaphors for human culture, yet the mercantile inferno of slavery deliberately disrupts the slave's familial and kin life. For in the breeding of slaves many masters and overseers were their own studs. This grotesque-conjugal odiousness on the part of slavocracy can be found between the pages of Douglass' narrative; "... this was done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable" (Douglass, 1945, p. 49). Economic interests thus underplay the social familial relations such "that

slaveholders have ordained, and by law established” (Douglass, 1945, p. 49) the subversion of civilisation’s moral codes, in which the patrilineal succession of the planter has been forcibly replaced by a matrilineal succession of the slave. Indeed the peculiar institution had the South by the throat and the pitiful victim, our Douglass, allows his tears of sorrow write the narrative we have today. The result therefore is the birth of the tragic “mulatto” that features in most Afro-American literary creations to symbolise the displacement of the black American caught between two worlds as well as the master’s miscegenous desires.

One of the most sorrowful sights in Douglass’s narrative is how the mother related to the child. The least rudimentary relationship was permitted to exist, not for Douglass only, but “it is a custom to part children from their mothers at a very early age (Douglass, 1945, p. 48). “Separated” before he knew her as his mother, Douglass also saw her for not “more than four or five times in [his] life” (Douglass, 1945, p. 48). Douglass himself is the supreme authority on why slavocracy tried to annihilate the familial bond, hence he tellingly sums it up as “... to hinder the development of the child’s affection towards its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child” (Douglass, 1945, p. 48). The family under slavery thus suffered a great beating. This denied the black man that kinship identity necessary for collectivism and resulted in fragmentation and perpetual rootlessness. It fragmented the black man’s power and also resulted in the disturbance of the black man’s identity. The fact that Douglass’ mother “was hired by a Mr Steward, who lived about twelve miles from (his) home”, (Douglass, 1945, p. 49) is an indication of how commercial interests override familial interests of the chattel called a slave. Nichols (1963) argues that “the field hands were roused by a bell before dawn and were taken to the fields to work until it was too dark to see” (p. 51). He further asserts that “they laboured as many as sixteen or eighteen hours a day” (Nichols, 1963, p. 51). One therefore imagines Harriet Bailey, driven by that special mother’s love, walking the twelve miles after such toil, to be with the child – Douglass. Slavery therefore did not absolutely destroy the slave’s familial relations because the slaves in this instance metaphorically “owned” the night, while the master owned the day.

Despite the fact that slaves went at great pains to restore the natural familial relations as evidenced by Douglass’ mother, the diabolical side of slavery always poked its lovely face, rendering it very difficult for human relations to develop fully. When his mother falls sick, dies and is even buried, Douglass is not permitted to go see her such that Douglass “received the tidings of her death with much the same motions [he] would have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (Douglass, 1945, p. 49). Slavery thus can be viewed as an oppressive circumstance that tested the adoptive capacities of the young Douglass, caused deep seated structural distortions in the life of the seven year old chattel and blunted the natural affiliation expected of a natural human being. For when the fundamental core of the organisation, the family is denied, socialisation is generally severed. According to Gutman (1967), this “often serves to explain why so many slaves and their immediate descendants were disorganised in their individual behaviour” (p. xxi). Yet it is also noteworthy that if the seven year old Douglass under the economics of slavery had such feelings towards the mother, it is the new Douglass who now spells out his utmost concern with familial relations through language; the act of writing becomes an act of atonement and the economics of slavery is the spring board for the emergence of this narrative.

The family under slavery was an enormously complex entity such that if one were to draw a family tree and give an account of how its components related, a true maze it would be. Born and bred in such a tangle, the young Douglass is mesmerised by such demonic cannibalism as practised by the master as father and also by the mistress. The mulatto children under normal circumstances should have been “step children” who towards the mistress, slave children should look up as “step mother.” Yet the presence of the planter’s

illegitimate offspring is a constant source of discord and the mistress “[is] never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash” (Douglass, 1945, p. 49). “[When] she suspects her husband of showing to her mulatto children favours which he withholds from his black slaves” (Douglass, 1945, p. 49), this indeed shows that in some circumstances, some semblance of familial relations did in fact exist between the white father and his slave children but this was always guarded by the mistress. In most cases it was the priority of the economic relation over the kinship (blood) that is the true perversion of nature in this world that compels “... a man to sell his own children to human flesh mongers” (Douglass, 1945, p. 49). Henry Louis Gates observes that there is an ultimate reversal here; it is now the mistress, the proverbial carrier of culture, who demands that the master’s son be delivered up to the “human flesh-mongers” and traded for consumption. Such could be no mean motivation for the writer of the narrative, showing how the historical discourse of the day privileged certain economic terms through rendering other human beings to be chattels.

The chattel existence in Douglass’s narrative is not restricted to the deprivation of the hallmarks of identity and familial relations in the young slaves but also extends to the old slaves. Douglass introduces us to “Aunt Hester”, and the significance of the title “Aunt” cannot be over-emphasised. Even though the slave family was not permitted to exist, traces of enlarged blood-kin groups (extended family) were a common feature of the slave community. Of the Aunt Hester scenario therefore, Douglass vows, “I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything” (Douglass, 1945, p. 50), for to him, she was a member of the immediate family. On such slave community and black familial relations Gutman (1976) believes that “the rule of exogamy is a way of giving institutional recognition to the bond of kinship and serves as part of the machines for establishing and maintaining a wide ranging kinship system” (p. 91). And far above that, the effect of owners destroying African-American familial bonds is forcefully represented by the Aunt Hester – Ned Roberts relationship. First, Ned Roberts himself is a commoditised being who belongs to Colonel Lloyd hence the general term of possession “Lloyd’s Ned”. The very existence of black conjugal or familial bonds here is determined by the slave owner. When she “happened to be absent when [the] master desired her presence” (Douglass, 1945, p. 51), the most infernal whipping is the answer. The whipping itself is a symbolic act of raping her. In a world where men are property and women victims of the owner’s lust, a blunting or eradication of affection is normal. The only relationship approximating traditional familial or conjugal ones is Douglass’ temporary situation with his grandmother, a situation that soon ends when Douglass is delivered, as slave property, to the home plantation of Colonel Edward Lloyd.

If the prime attention of the first chapter of the narrative is to show the kin and familial relations conditioned by southern plantation culture, specifically on the black family, then chapter two is bent on showing the foil – the white family. Douglass’ style of writing continues along the stream of binary opposition, setting opposites in motion so as to show the breadth and depth of familial relations as conditioned by the economics of slavery. “My master’s family consisted of two sons Andrew and Richard; one daughter, Lucretia, and her husband, Captain Thomas Auld”, the chapter begins. Here we have a real “family”, one that can be spelt out clearly and above all, one that is able to accommodate extended family branches like Captain Thomas Auld. The narrator follows this train of thought by particularly stating that “they lived in one house”, an indication of familial relations sustained by the agrarian economy, watered by the sweat of the slaves and also at the expense of the familial bonds. The puzzle that has been initiated in the first chapter finds its completion here. In relation to the chattel existence, the planter mistress cannot accommodate such extended kinship terms as “stepson/stepdaughter” to her husband’s illegitimate children. Yet plantation culture would privilege a white man in the extended

family as “son-in-law”. The creative individual therefore paints such a picture, exposing the American hypocrisy founded on economic terms defined by racial differences.

Furthermore, the constant repetition of the word “family” in chapter two (Douglass, 1945, p. 53) and explanations of different stations of employment of the white man is to emphasize the absence of the same quality in the black family. The economic grandeur is for the sustenance of the intact family unit of the master whilst the existence of the slaves is of a fragmented lot. They are, if names be allowed, simply given as “Peter, Isaacs and Jake” (Douglass, 1945, p. 53) and what unites or the relationship they are allowed is as chattels who together man the sloop - Sally Lloyd. Such words as “kept”, “owned”, “belonged”, show the commodification of the slaves, which robbed them of their freedom, and as property of another person, their familial relations suffered a great deal. For indeed, other slaves only come to the home plantation en route to where they knew not; sold out to “some other trader” or “to Austin Woolfok” (Douglass, 1945, p. 52).

This satanic activity of selling off another human being can never be overemphasized and its effect on the familial relations of slaves cannot be fully committed to words, for it will be an understatement. Commercial deportation was the greatest horror to the slaves, for it painfully pruned husbands from wives; parents from children and also severed without any mercy, friends and associates. That is why such an activity was also done “as a warning to the slaves remaining” (Douglass, 1945, p. 56). And that it was “a warning” also shows that the slaves were indeed keen in keeping their families intact but on most occasions they were helpless, for they could not determine the economic stability of their master’s fortunes that so much necessitated sending off some of their beloved ones to the auction block.

Almost similar to the auction block is the valuation of property for disposal after the death of the master. In situations where, “Men and women, young and old, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep and swine” (Douglass, 1945, p. 90), family breaks-ups were inevitable. Through binary opposition, the chattel existence of slaves is emphasised and also kin associations for the slaves once more established as with animals. We are made to visualise the “horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children” (Douglass, 1945, p. 90) ranked together. The first had evidence Douglass submitted and the moving prose in which is couched his findings and observations combine to make his narrative one of the most arresting autobiographical statements in the entire catalogue of American reform literature.

When Douglass quotes the slave poet Whittier, the conditioning of African-American literary activity by the economic terms is furthered and clarified. The poem comes after Douglass has included one indelible portrait of his grandmother’s disheartening treatment and made the declaration that more than anything her mistreatment had caused his unutterable loathing of slaveholders. The passionate tone he uses to describe her pitiful situation shows that slavery has not completely obliterated familial and social memory. Like peels of a fruit which are only fit for rotting in the rubbish heap, the master realising that she is now too old to be of any use banishes her to the forest and “made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness” (Douglass, 1945, p. 98).

This “devoted mother of twelve children” has just been a labour reproducing machine for the plantation economy. She now is in the same position with Henry who has been crippled; neither fit for production nor reproduction, hence has to be discarded without any emotion. The familial emotions can only come from the literary artist who expresses them through the language of the narrative.

In addition, the narrative paints a picture of a family beaten and battered about. Dehumanisation of the utmost supremacy on its components could not have seen a well organised unit that functions properly. Instead of mothers taking care of their beautiful children, we see “the old women having the care of them” (Douglass, 1945, p. 54), for every existing soul has to be a productive tool for the master’s satiation. After a long day of toiling like machines, after preparing for the next day, “old and young; male and female, married and single, drop down side by side, on one common bed, - the cold, damp floor” (Douglass, 1945, p. 59) and indeed like animals they exist. Meaningful familial relations could not be conceived under such circumstances. If it is the “economics of slavery” therefore that denies them the human affections, it does not mean that it is the slaves who are pathological and genetically disorganised.

Where the slave family was permitted to survive, it did not go unscathed either. An air of utter helplessness and fear always haunted them: the drivers’ lash being a constant and indispensable aid to the system’s functioning. Usually on these isolated plantations the overseer was judge, jury, prosecutor and executioner, and he often wielded his power like a medieval monarch. That is the sorrowful sight we find old Barney and young Barney, father and son. Quite a pity it is to realise that the father is absolutely helpless in defending the son and also the son the father. Slavery robs old Barney of the respect which his status as parent and elder demanded from young Barney. As creative machines for the master’s fulfilment, the system does not recognise them as father and son and for sure Douglass’ heart burns with fury to see “old Barney, a man between fifty and sixty years of age, uncover his hold head, kneel down upon the cold, damp ground, and receive upon his naked and toil-worn shoulder more than thirty lashes at a time” (Douglass, 1945, p. 61).

Shortly after a detailed and emotive description of such a horrendous transaction, it is not by accident that the narrator shifts to the description of the full Lloyd family in its serene completeness, but to make us get a full polarisation between these two social entities defined by one term-family. Contributing to the literary effectiveness of the narrative is its pathos and deeply affecting tone, evocative of sympathy, as when Colonel Lloyd went to a slave and “without a moment’s warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death” (Douglass, 1945, p. 62). Born out of the economics of slavery’s blunting of familial relations, the narrative is without humour or light touches. Its tone is steadily condemnatory, all roads converging to this end.

If the black family under slavery was such a precarious institution, it is also necessary to see how these chattels responded and what the slavocracy cultural traits did to them. To evade the cunning espionage by the slaveholders, slave family heads had to socialise their family members accordingly, by establishing the maxim “a still tongue makes a wise head” (Douglass, 1945, p. 62). Whilst this is a realistic literary representation of slavery as it existed, the conscious artist Douglass does not end there but goes on to comment, “they suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in so doing prove themselves a part of the human family” (Douglass, 1945, p. 62). Slaves are therefore made to relate in accordance to the economic defining characteristics of their masters and thus read the world as spelt out by the day’s socio-economic milieu as a means for survival.

Moreover, where deprivation, denial, the auction block, and the lash failed to sever familial relations, violent death in the form of murder by the master would also take its toll. The savage barbarity of slave owners and overseers in many situations resulted in the death of the victim, robbing the slave community of a dear father, brother, son, daughter, niece or friend. Particularly telling is the murder of Demby by Mr. Gore, who in his defence takes the economic line that “He [Demby] was setting a dangerous example to the other

slaves... the result of which would be the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites" (Douglass, 1945, p. 67). When the narrator records how Mrs Hicks "murdered [his] wife's cousin" (Douglass, 1945, p. 68), the emotive tone of a bereaved Douglass for the member of his extended family is clear. For Nichols,

All these punishments - whipping, chaining, selling, shooting were legal and customary, but laws designed to protect the property of owners and court cases show that the mutilation, burning, smothering, and torture alleged by the ex-slaves were not uncommon. (1963, p. 645)

That the creative artist (Douglass) stored up all these events is an utmost show of concern with his fellow beings which he could not express then, but now the pent up emotions burst their imprisonment and like an obituary, claim their familial bonds through the act of autobiography. When slavery had done away with mothers and fathers, a substitute approximating a family was not given. The young Douglass thus learns of his chattel existence as he has to drive cows at evening, keep the fowls out of the garden, clean the yard, run errands for his master's daughter and find birds shot by this master Daniel. The familial terms like "father" have been replaced by the economic terms like "master". Orphaned yet but with a living father, the young Douglass has to fend for himself, finding (stealing) a sack so as to use as a blanket. Economic value thus has taken priority over the social needs. The traditional family is non-existent, and the dehumanised children, operating on the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest, fight it out for survival. When called to eat mush, the children "like so many pigs they would come ad devour the mush" (Douglass, 1945, p. 72). Indeed an animalistic relationship existed among these children fighting for survival, and despite the grimness of such situations, the satisfaction of the planter could only have been that they, like fattened animals for the market could also grow and be of economic value in the form of labour and also as stock for sale one day.

A family, a home, blood relations - of what significance could any of these be to the young Douglass blunted by the economics of slavery? "My home was charmless; it was not home to me" (Douglass, 1945, p. 73), laments the young Douglas. For the first time we also learn that he actually had a brother and two sisters who lived in the same house with him, yet Douglass laments, "but early separation of us from our mother had well-nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories" (73). Such was Douglass' situation; the fangs of commercial deportation had obliterated any blood and kin relationship that ever existed. Another separation therefore would be of little consequence.

Though he does also describe the treatment of fellow slaves, the impression left by the first half of the narrative is one of a lone existence plagued by anxiety. The white world rigorously suppresses all knowledge and action that might lead the narrator to a sense of his humanity, a humanity that finds expression in kin associations and familial bonds. Whilst the white master wants a silently labouring brute, much of the remainder of the narrative reflects the slave's expanding awareness of language and commercial potential and its capacity to carry him toward new dimensions of experience and social existence.

One of the most touching portraits of the slave family in the narrative is that which is created by the slave master. Like a demigod, Mr Covey, one who prophesies the Christian religion, "a sincere worshipper of the most high God" (Douglass, 1945, p. 105) compels Caroline to mate with Mr Harrison. This Mr Harrison, a family man also, is hired from somewhere else, severed from his own family and forcibly made to mate with Caroline, to produce children who "were regarded as being quite an addition to his wealth" (Douglass, 1945, p. 105). For Baker (1973), "The most bizarre profit accruing to the owners in the Covey episode, however is not slave wages, but slave offspring" (p. 40). Whilst the

others like Colonel Lloyd had to harvest slave labour, the others would have to take the very fruit of the slave's womb, a confiscation of surplus value with vengeance. In Baker's words, "it manifests the supreme aberrancy of relationships conditioned by the southern traffic in human chattel" (1973, p. 46). It is this grotesque diabolism that creates a crisis that Douglass must negotiate, first through physical combat and ultimately through the abolitionist platform as an orator, the step that leads to the creation of an autobiography.

A further catalogue of the black familial relations under the weight of slavery also draws us to one character, Sandy Jenkins. Whilst his acquaintance to Douglass is an indication that despite limitations set by slavery, slaves actually have obligations towards one another determined by familial and kin consciousness, what is of utmost importance however is what the marriage to the wife implied. Here we have a "free wife" who lives about four miles away and Sandy has to go there on Saturdays. Sandy is also implied to have been the traitor who betrayed the planned escape by Douglass and his fellows. Baker (1973) notes, "Sandy seems to represent the inescapable limiting condition of Afro-American slavery in the South; he is the pure, negative product of an economics of slavery" (p. 47). He refuses to be a part of that special family that Douglass has tried to form, the adverse effects of slavery have taken their toll on him and he instead through his betrayal tries to be a part and parcel (family) to those who have enslaved him.

It is through conscientisation born mainly through education that Douglass forms a Christian brotherhood of fellow slaves through a Sabbath school and formulates also a plan for a collective escape from bondage. The construction of a family for his fellow beings was critical to him as he says that "they were great days to my soul," it was "the sweetest engagement with which I was blessed" because "we loved each other" (Douglass, 1945, p. 122). This shows that the slave community as a family was not inherently pathological because of skin pigmentation; because it actually enjoyed and desired kin associations, only that the southern barbarism would not have any of it. A community dedicated Douglass's efforts are aimed at creating a substitute of that which had been denied and this is seen when he would lament "my fellow-slaves were dear to me" (Douglass, 1945, p. 122). But this progress towards liberation in the agrarian south is foiled by one whose mind is so "tarred" by the economics of slavery that he betrays the collective, thus reflecting the fact that there is no simple and naïve romanticisation of the familial relation under slavery.

Even though the possibility of collective freedom is thus foreclosed by treachery within the slave community, what seals it is the master himself. When in prison, that "special family" is not allowed to continue hence the reason why they are separated. And the conscientised architect, the literate "nigger", Douglass is broken in spirit. In his accomplices he had found strength and that familial bond that differentiates a man from a brute, but now left by himself, he has to devise ways of chartering his own plane. "I was now left to my fate. I was all alone, and within the walls of a stone prison", he laments (Douglass, 1945, p. 130).

On another level of analysis, Douglass finds that revolt, collective action and literacy all fail to give him the passport to "Freeland" that can see him attaining familial bonds unconditioned by the economics of slavery with a commercial function. The southern patriarchs who have stolen his familial bonds have also stolen his surplus value but not his consciousness. Having gained the right to hire his own time and allowed just a tiny portion of his sweat and heavily reprimanded for attending to the demands of kinship associations (religion), Douglass resolves to uproot himself from the position of simply an economic investment to northern capitalist economy, a search for full-fledged familial relations.

On getting to the North, the stifled chattel sprouts and spreads his wings. "This may certify that I joined together in holy matrimony" (Douglass, 1945, p. 145), indeed it is a certification that binds them "together" unlike that of Sandy Jenkins, doomed forever to passive acquiescence and weekend visitation. This binary opposition between the two couples, the polarisation between the north and the south is what the conscientised narrator has come to represent in the act of autobiography. As Baker (1973) would have it, "what Douglass' certificate of marriage signifies is that the black man has repossessed himself in a manner that enables him to enter the kind of relationship disrupted or foreclosed by the economics of slavery" (p. 48).

What the North represents is a subversion of the economics of slavery, a subversion that not only results in a reconstitution of familial relations and an independent economic identity but also culminated in a civil war that tore the nation apart. Whilst slavery was an ideology of deprivation to the slaves, rendering them to chattel existence for the master's satiation, freedom in the North transforms property into humanity. The expressive, married, economically astute self at the close of Douglass' work represents a convergence of the voices that mark various autobiographical postures of the narrative as a whole. As shown by the Appendix, the narrative is abolitionist propaganda and slavery has been its prime motivation.

It is also on that note that Baker (1973, p. 49) would conclude that Douglass' authorship, oratory, and economics converge in the history of the narrative's publication and the course of action its appearance mandated in the life of the author. Commercial deportation and the economics of slavery heavily impacted the familial relations of the blacks and taking account of how they fared is what the slave narrators like Douglass had to face head on.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, in its lasting effects on individuals and their children, American slavery was indescribably worse than any recorded servitude, ancient or modern. The slave household often developed a matrifocal pattern. Enslavement was harsh and constricted the enslaved but it did not destroy their capacity to adopt and sustain the vital familial and kin associations and beliefs that served as the underpinning of a developing African American culture. Although it was weak, although it was frequently broken, the slave family provided an important buffer, a refuge from the rigors of slavery. And though the slave trade drove blood relatives apart, bondsmen's common persecution brought many of them together in extended family groupings which provided for many of their emotional needs. The family as presented through the historians' perspective was in short, an important survival mechanism from the threatening economics of slavery.

The autobiographical slave narrative thus is a rich resource, a gem of plantation truth of how the slaves lived, recorded by slaves themselves and attested as true by many. For in them the proverbial lion is now telling the story and this first-hand information that captures the social life of the slaves is valuable. Far reaching claims of the importance of this genre have also been made by the contemporary African-American theorists such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr; who has argued that the narratives provided the basis paradigm for virtually all later fiction and autobiography by black Americans (McDowell and Rampersand, 1987, p. ix).

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