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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Slavery between Greed and Survival in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*

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**| ABSTRACT**
Solomon Northup's Twelve Years a Slave is a powerful memoir and slave narrative that reveals the barbarity and inhumanity of the 19th-century American slave trade. Through his firsthand account of being kidnapped and sold into slavery, Northup exposes the greed, deceit, violence, and subjugation that drove white slave traders and masters to dehumanize and commodify black people for their own economic gain. Northup's narrative sheds light on the brutality of slavery and how it stripped both enslaved people and white slaveholders of their humanity. The book illustrates the horrors of slavery, from the physical and emotional abuse inflicted upon enslaved people to the use of religion to justify and uphold the system of slavery. Northup's narrative emphasizes the helplessness, impotence, and oppression of black slaves, particularly those who were born free but were abducted and sold into slavery like himself. Ultimately, the book reflects the resilience and determination of enslaved people to survive in a violent, oppressive, and hostile world.

**| KEYWORDS**

Slavery, brutality, dehumanization, oppression, human endurance, black suffering

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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## 1. Introduction

*Twelve Years a Slave*, a memoir and slave narrative of Solomon Northup, was first published in 1853, three years after the Fugitive Slave Act. It recounts the story of Solomon Northup, a free black man from Saratoga Springs, New York, who was abducted and forced into slavery in Washington, D.C., in 1841 by two white men. The two men, called Brown and Hamilton, offered him a two-week job as a musician with a circus in Washington City since he was a talented violinist. Northup accepted the offer and accompanied them. Once they got there, they drugged him at dinner, and, once waking up, he found out that he was sold into slavery under the name of Platt for 12 years. Solomon Northup's slave narrative was considerably successful as an abolitionist indictment against slavery and served as an important cultural documentation of the unfavorable circumstances of black slaves on southern antebellum plantations.

In her exploration of "The Cultural Significance of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*", Mollie Lieblich (2015) argues that slave narratives were written as propaganda for abolitionism; thus, they often followed recurring narrative structures and literary conventions. Then, she enumerates a number of the peculiar characteristics of the genre:

> Authenticity was considered essential. Most pre-emancipation slave narratives include phrases such as "written by himself" or "herself" on title pages, as well as numerous testimonials, prefaces, and letters of endorsement by white abolitionists and supporters. The narratives usually began with "I was born," identifying a specific birthplace but no date of birth since slaves often did not have that knowledge. Many narratives also included a photo or engraved portrait of the author and included appendices— bills of sale, free papers, newspaper clippings, sermons, speeches, and poems simultaneously upheld the legitimacy of their story while arguing the case against slavery. (Lieblich, 2015)

Moreover, she adds that white editors adjusted slave narratives to the structures of nineteenth century sentimental literature in order to attract audiences across the nation through reinforcing the typical shocking themes of slavery. According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Slavery is documented as a condition of extreme deprivation, necessitating increasingly forceful resistance".

Northup's Twelve Years a Slave is believed to be an accurate and specific account of the brutal and inhumane treatment he experienced as a slave and documentation of the peculiar institution of slavery in the 19th century. He declares that "it is necessary in this narrative, in order to present a full and truthful statement of all the principal events in the history of my life, and to portray the institution of Slavery as I have seen and known it, to speak of well-known places, and of many persons who are yet living" (Northup, 1853, p. 50). His truthful description of events, people and places would support the credibility of his account and counter any attempt to discredit it as imagination or fiction (Lieblich, 2015). In brief, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how slavery was conceived of by the greedy white enslavers as an economic enterprise and how it was experienced by the enslaved black people as a hardship to survive through the eyes of Solomon Northup. But before embarking on analysis, a historical account of slavery must be provided.

**2. The Evolution of Slavery: From Ancient Societies to the New World**

According to Philip D. Morgan, there are two striking fundamental differences between ancient and modern slavery: in ancient times, slavery was an equal opportunity condition since all ethnicities could be slaves, and they were seen as a social, not an economic, category. He further argues that Classical Greece and Rome, two of the few significant slave societies in history that preceded American slavery, can be regarded as models for slavery's expansion in the New World. In Rome's case, slavery was a concomitant of imperial expansion, while Greeks enslaved abandoned infants. The position of slavery in the aforementioned ancient societies was unquestionable – even Aristotle thought that some people were slaves by nature. Thus, Ancient forms of slavery offered an important legal basis and justification for their modern counterpart (Morgan, 2005, p. 51).

Even though the Quran and Islamic Law were essentially color-blind and regardless of the fact that Muslims enslaved many people considered "white", medieval Arabs were the first to establish a long-distance black slave trade, which funneled millions of Africans across the Sahara Desert, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean to North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf between the seventh and the twentieth centuries. Such a large-scale slave exportation facilitated its Atlantic vis-à-vis, providing it with ready-made systems of slave marketing. Africans themselves could enslave each other because the concept of Africanness did not make sense back then. Africa was under-populated, and a wide range of dependent statuses, including slavery, existed. However, there were some kingdoms that objected to local slavery as well as the slave trade, but the ethnic fragmentation of sub-Saharan Africa and the lack of an overall religious or political unity could not help stop the brutal institution (Morgan, 2005, pp. 51-52).

European economy began to flourish between the tenth and twelfth centuries, especially in the conquered rich Arab sugar-producing regions at the eastern bank of the Mediterranean. The development of these Crusader states required the use of large numbers of Slavic slaves who were delivered by Venetian and Genoese merchants. In fact, "the Latin word for people of Slavic descent, *sclavus*, became the origin of the word slave in English (and in French *esclave*, in Spanish *esclavo*, and in German *sklave*), and replaced the non-ethnic Latin term *servus*", according to Morgan (p. 52). At that time, the slave population in Europe was mainly 'white'. The expansion of sugar production westwards (towards Western Europe) went hand in hand with a considerable growth of the white slave trade. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 put an end to the Slavic slave trade. Therefore, sub-Saharan Africans became the only available alternative for Christian Europe. However, North African and Muslim slaves outnumbered black slaves in Iberia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Morgan, 2005, p. 52).

Christians had been victimizing each other throughout the Middle Ages, but the increasing sense of cultural and religious European unity, along with Christianity's long struggle with Islam, put an end to the enslavement of those deemed fellow Europeans. Nevertheless, these so-called free-labor nations would develop some of the harshest slave regimes in the Americas. They first used Indians as slaves – forced Indian labor, but the latter "were not able to survive long enough to be profitable", according to Morgan (p. 53). Consequently, Europeans considered enslaving the poor or other marginal groups, but the revival of European slavery was considerably problematic. The transportation of convicts and indentured servitude were temporary alternatives, but they could not cover the huge labor shortage Europeans faced. Thus, the best available labor supply turned out to be African slaves (Morgan, 2005, p. 53). Therefore, slavery became indelibly linked with people of African descent and blackness blended with the dishonor, humiliation, and bestialization that were universally associated with the institution in the New World. The racial factor and the thoroughly commercial character became the most distinctive features of slavery, and its development went hand in hand with the development of America (Morgan, p. 54). In this regard, Robin L. Einhorn (2008) says that "the history of slavery cannot be separated from the history of business in the United States, especially in the context of the relationship between public power and individual property rights" (p. 491).

**3. Commodity or Human? Exploring the Theme of Greed in *Twelve Years a Slave***

After providing a brief account of the history of slavery from ancient times to the very beginning of American slavery, it is time to scrutinize Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, which is an account and cultural documentation of antebellum slavery in southern plantations through the eyes of the slave. Northup's narrative echoes two completely different attitudes towards the institution of slavery: of course, the greedy white masters (enslavers) saw slavery as a "thoroughly commercial enterprise" that played an important role in the development of America (Einhorn, 2008, p. 491); the white slave masters claimed that the institution was beneficial to both sides. However, it brought only oppression, deprivation, humiliation, and bestialization to black slaves. The helpless slaves could not instigate any act of resistance but surrender to the will of their enslavers in order to survive.

The theme of greed is present throughout Northup's narrative. In Chapter II, Northup relates how he was abducted in Washington D.C. and sold into slavery by the deceitful Brown and Hamilton. The act of luring the free Solomon away from Saratoga Springs to Washington City, which was a slave state, and selling him to the famous slave trader James H. Burch shows how greed corrupts and deprives the two white men of their human integrity and kindness and pushes them to kidnap a free black man from the North to sell him into slavery for a few dollars.

In Chapter III, Solomon awakens chained in a cell in Burch's slave pen. As Burch enters through the door, Solomon protests his imprisonment; he writes, "Again and again I asserted I was no man's slave" (Northup, 1853, p. 43). Consequently, Burch beats him up unmercifully with a wooden paddle and keeps doing so as Solomon refuses to say that he is a runaway slave from Georgia until the paddle is broken on his back, and then he whips him until he is unable to speak. Burch threatens Solomon that "he would either conquer or kill him if he ever dared to mention that he was free or kidnapped again (Northup, p. 46). Northup is silenced and shocked. He says, "It was impossible, I reasoned, that men could be so unjust as to detain me as a slave when the truth of my case was known" (p. 47). Moreover, he adds, "Alas! I had not then learned the measure of "man's inhumanity to man", nor to what limitless extent of wickedness he will go for the love of gain" (p. 48). Northup could not believe how greed unnaturally pushes man to be wicked, unjust and inhuman to man and how Burch, in particular – and the white man in general – is prone to lie and ignore the humanity of another human being for profit.

The events of Chapter V take place in New Orleans, where Solomon and the rest of Burch's slaves are delivered to a slave trader, ironically named Theophilus Freeman. This man whose name echoes the word freedom gives Solomon an arbitrary name, Platt, and thus obscures his true identity and completes his rite of passage from freedom to slavery. In the opening of Chapter VI, Northup sarcastically describes Freeman and the way he treats his slaves, or rather "animals" and "property". He kicks the older men and women and cracks his whip about the ears of the younger slaves to wake them up. Freeman trains them to "appear smart and lively" "before the admission of customers", and the way he arranges men and women each on a side according to "their respective heights like a commodity. Then, he makes them dance for potential customers while Solomon plays the violin (Northup, 1853, pp. 78-79).

Northup further recounts Eliza's grievous separation from her children. Her boy Randall was sold to a planter in Baton Rouge. Later, she is going to be separated from her daughter, Emily, when a plantation owner called William Ford strikes a deal with Freeman to buy her along with Solomon. Solomon comments that he has never "seen such an exhibition of intense, unmeasured, and unbounded grief as when Eliza was parted from her child" (Northup, 1853, p. 85). Ford feels pity for Eliza and decides to buy Emily as well, but Freeman turns his offer down because he believes "there were heaps and piles of money to be made of her…when she was a few years older" (p. 86). Northup reveals that Eliza never saw nor heard of her children again. The evil, corrupt and cruel Freeman conceives of black slaves as livestock. He has no problem separating Eliza and her children because he sees them as commodities that should generate as much money as possible.

In a number of chapters, Northup relates that he had been hired out multiple times by Tibeats and Epps to other plantation owners to earn money for them. He says that he was hired out to Mr. Tanner and Mr. Eldret by John M. Tibeats and to Judge Turner, for instance, by Edwin Epps after a blight of caterpillars destroys his cotton crops. Thus, black slaves were seen as money-making machines that were required to generate piles of money incessantly for the greedy white masters.

**3. Endurance in the Face of Oppression: The Theme of Survival in *Twelve Years a Slave***

Survival is a recurring theme in *Twelve Years a Slave*, too. The theme is set forth in Chapter III when Northup yields to Burch's claim that he was not a free man but a runaway from Georgia to survive the white man's violence and threats. Northup tried to protest his new condition again and again, but the cat-o'-ninetails whip made him give up on his identity and freedom because he would lose both if he dies under Burch's flogging.

In Chapter VIII, Ford sells Solomon to his chief-carpenter, John M. Tibeats, to pay a debt. The abusive, cynic, and unreasonable Tibeats is angered and tries to flog Solomon for not respecting his instructions, but the latter snatched the whip from his master's hand and lashed him "until my right arm ached" (Northup, 1853, p. 111). Tibeats leaves the plantation, swearing he will "have satisfaction and that it was not half over yet" (p. 112). Later, Tibeats comes with two other men on horses; they capture Platt and then hang him. Mr. Chapin, William Ford's overseer, intervenes and saves Solomon. He then chases Tibeats and his companions away, threatening to shoot them. He also asks Lawson to ride to Pine Woods to tell Master Ford that Tibeats is "trying to murder Platt" (p. 116). In fact, even though Chapin testifies that Platt (Solomon) is a "faithful boy", he saves him only to protect Ford's interest, who still "holds a mortgage on Platt of four hundred dollars" (pp. 115-116). Apparently, Solomon regrets what he has done. He writes: "I was conscious that I subjected myself to unimaginable punishment. The reaction that followed my extreme ebullition of anger produced the most painful sensations of anger" (p. 114). He is so terrified and terrorized after he beats Tibeats because he knows that he might not come out of it alive as he says, "Surely my time had come. I should never behold the light of another day" (p. 115). Even his fellow slaves could not help him because they fear for their lives.

William Ford comes to free Solomon in Chapter IX after he was left tied up all day long. After a few days, Tibeats hires him out to Mr. Tanner, Ford's brother-in-law, where he remains in relative safety for around a month. In Chapter X, Solomon returns to Tibeats, who tries to kill him with an axe after a trivial disagreement. This time, he fights back in self-defense and runs away for his life towards the dangers and wilderness of Great Pacoudrie Swamp. He crosses the swamp safely and finds shelter and protection in Ford's home.

The end of Chapter XI highlights the beginning of Northup's real agony following his transfer to Edwin Epps, a slave master who is known as a "nigger breaker" (Northup, 1853, p. 188). In Chapter XII, He describes his new cruel master, the daily duties and living conditions of slaves, in addition to tough agricultural labor in cotton plantations. To sum up, he tells of what black slaves had to deal with to survive their master's cruelty. For instance, Edwin Epps is a sadist who used to believe that the Bible grants him the right to abuse his slaves and do whatever he likes to them as they are his own property. According to Sally Ferguson (1996), "Christians used the theological concepts of original sin, blood sacrifice, and spiritual atonement to rationalize the moral contradictions and brutality that attended the practice of Christian slavery" (p. 298). Epps whips his slaves if they fail to reap at least 200 pounds of cotton every day. Moreover, he rapes Patsey, a young female slave, repeatedly as he is attracted to her. One day, Epps forces Solomon to whip Patsey because she left the plantation to get a piece of sweet-smelling soap from Mistress Shaw without Epps' permission. Platt, under protest, obeys because Epps threatens to kill him, yet Master Epps snatches the whip away from him and flogs the poor Patsey ruthlessly until her back becomes covered with long welts, intersecting each other like a network.

Furthermore, Solomon Northup recounts in Chapter XIV that he was hired out by a man called Judge Turner to earn money for Epps, whose cotton crops were blighted by caterpillars. Solomon says that Turner made him overseer of his fellow slaves and asked him to whip anyone standing idle. In Chapter XV, he writes that he was in charge of a gang of around 100 slaves for three years, as Epps hires him out to work in sugar plantations every year. In Chapter XVI, he relates that he was made a driver in the fields, a black slave who assists the overseer, by Epps himself. He was then forced to whip fellow slaves, especially in the presence of Mater Epps, but he says he tried to be lenient when Epps was away. It is apparent that Solomon had to flog other slaves to avoid being flogged himself. He had to be cruel to survive.

In Chapter XVII, he tells horrifying stories of some slaves who tried to escape bondage as he reflects on the dangers of running away because he has asked Armsby, an indentured white worker, to send a letter to his friends in the North and agreed to pay him in return. Unfortunately, the white man took Solomon's money and exposed his plan to Epps. However, He recounts, in Chapters XIX and XX, how he meets a white abolitionist from Canada called Samuel Bass, who promises to help him gain his freedom back. Bass sends a number of letters to Northup's family and friends in Saratoga Springs, but he does not receive any answer from them the whole summer of 1852. Yet he promises Solomon that he would travel to New York State to contact his relatives in person. In the final two chapters, Northup recalls the day he gained his freedom back, January 3, 1853. He was rescued and freed by Henry B. Northup, an attorney and relative of the family that had once owned Solomon's father. The concluding chapter recounts that Northup brought Brown, Hamilton, and James Burch – the men responsible for his abduction – to trial, yet they avoided prosecution after lengthy legal proceedings. The details of his death and burial have never been documented.

**4. Conclusion**

In the final analysis, Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* aims to expose the brutality and immoral crimes of slavery back in the 19th century and the suffering of black people in this era. Slavery is a moral cancer that deprives slaves of African descent and white masters alike of their humanity. The latter conceives of enslaved black people as inferior and inhuman and considers them as mere instruments or livestock. Slavery and the love of gain pushed the greedy white slave traders and masters to resort to

deceit, violence, bestialization and so on and so forth to dehumanize and commoditize black people in order to maintain this economic enterprise. They even use religion to subjugate slaves, justify their atrocities and legalize slavery in general, as in the case of Edwin Epps. Northup's narrative also emphasizes the helplessness, impotence, and oppression of black slaves, especially those free blacks who were kidnapped and sold into slavery like himself. It also reflects human endurance and survival in a violent, oppressive and detrimental world. Yet, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this study, notably the concentrated focus on a singular narrative which, albeit profoundly impactful, may not encapsulate the multifaceted experiences of the countless souls ensnared by the shackles of slavery. This exploration, confined largely to Northup's perspective, risks overlooking the broader socio-political tapestry and the myriad narratives that collectively paint a more nuanced picture of slavery's grotesque visage. Future inquiries must endeavor to weave together the disparate threads of individual stories, drawing from a rich corpus of slave narratives to construct a more comprehensive mosaic of despair and resilience. Such endeavors should not only traverse the expanse of personal accounts but also delve into the socio-economic underpinnings and the complex interplay of power dynamics that sustained the institution of slavery. Moreover, the exploration of abolitionist efforts and the moral quandaries faced by individuals on both sides of the slavery divide could offer invaluable insights into the collective struggle towards emancipation. As we cast our gaze beyond the confines of the past, it becomes imperative to trace the indelible scars left by slavery on the fabric of contemporary society. The legacy of slavery manifested in enduring racial disparities and systemic injustices, demands a rigorous examination to foster a deeper understanding and catalyze meaningful change.

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