

**Authenticating the Self in the Slave Narrative of Frederick Douglass's
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,
Written by Himself and Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl**

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Abstract

All art involves self-projection to a certain extent and in the novel or drama, the writer projects his own personality into the characters that he creates. In their respective narratives or autobiographies, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs have sought to tell their stories despite the restrictions of the period. As runaway slaves in the America of the 19th century, both Douglass and Jacobs risk capture by their former slave masters when they wrote their stories. Yet the need to inform the world about their experiences under the institution of slavery; the horror, the inhumanity, the abuse both physical and sexual, far outweigh the dangers that surround them. Viewed as objects to be bought and sold in America, Slave Narratives are a weapon for the sable race to authenticate their very existence as human beings.

Keywords: Autobiography, Slave Narratives, American slavery, Authentication, Self-hood

All art involves self-projection to a certain extent and in the novel or drama, the writer projects his own personality into the characters that he creates. As a result, self-projection is inevitable in literature. Through the ages, man has always been fascinated with his 'self' and in almost every age autobiographical writing is evident (Sarojini 199). Autobiography illumines the author's inner self using external descriptions and what makes it unique is that it is retrospective account of the autobiographer's life, written with affirmed fidelity (201).

Sarojini explains that the term autobiography was coined in 1809 when Robert Southey commented on the life of a Portuguese painter Francisco Vierra in the Quarterly Review (202). The word autobiography can be described in terms of the three constituent elements – autos (self), bios (life), and graphe (writing) (Andrews 2). In his essay *The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*, William L. Andrews writes that autobiography has its birth in the desire to explain and justify the self (223), while Georges Gusdorf has explained it as a need to do away with misunderstandings and to restore an

incomplete or deformed truth (223).

An examination of Black American literary tradition reveals that it began with the oral tradition with its roots in Africa. Some of these stories were very popular with both Blacks and Whites at the time (Dickson 322). These stories about the experience of capture and enslavement were passed on from mouth to mouth throughout the antebellum period. Black American autobiography is a continuation of this creative literary tradition and these writings are a reflection of the epic experience of this group. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. commented in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, “The black slave narrators sought to indict both those who enslaved them and the metaphysical system drawn upon to justify their enslavement. They did so using the most enduring weapon at their disposal, the printing press” (xiii). Since these writings were autobiographies they emerged as some of the most powerful indictments against slavery and ultimately, they came to be called Slave Narratives. Gates Jr. not only describes the Slave Narratives as “a remarkable and enduring visible legacy of African’s enslavement in the New World” (xi) but he also describes these writings as an opportunity for former slaves to “testify against their captors and to bear witness to the urge of every black slave to be free and literate and accorded all the ‘rights of man’” (xi). For Black autobiographers, autobiography fulfils their need for a rhetorical mode to do battle against racism. Writing their own stories allows them to give a first-hand account of the horrors they have had to endure. Though other types of writing like treatises, pamphlets, addresses and appeals thrived during the late eighteen and early nineteen centuries yet it is only Black autobiography which is capable of having a mass impact on the conscience of ante-bellum Americans (*The First Century* 226). “In the process of imitation, revision, and repetition, the black slave’s narrative came to be a communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual’s autobiography. Each slave author, in writing about his or her personal life experiences, simultaneously wrote on behalf of the millions of silent slaves still held captives throughout the Caribbean, Latin American and the American South” (Gates Jr., xiii).

If in White autobiography the convention is to write the success story, in Black autobiography however, the convention is to focus more on the escape from bondage to freedom as seen in many slave narratives like *Narrative of William W. Brown* and *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*. Experienced abolitionists recognise that autobiography or first-person narrative is the most effective tool in their fight against slavery in the South. A reason is because

these writings offer an in-depth and intimate look into a world which before stood as an enigma. These narratives gave northern readers an intimate look into the institution of slavery as practised in the slave states. As Gould describes, "...the depravity of Southern planters and the irresponsible fact of sexual miscegenation, the hypocrisy of Southern Christianity, scenes of brutal whipping and torture, rebellious slaves who are murdered..." (19). The story of a runaway slave and his experiences under slavery is bound to be more compelling than any oratory or pamphlet by a White abolitionist. However, black autobiographies or slave narratives have a problem with historicity and early historians have always believed in the weakness of factual substance since these writings have traditionally been an arm of abolitionist propaganda against slavery. John W. Blassingame, however dismisses these earlier beliefs and contends that:

Many blacks who had purchased their freedom, been manumitted, or escape from bondage wrote autobiographies without the aid of white editors. A comparison of the narratives of such well-known blacks as William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, Pennington, Jermain Loguen, Austin Steward, and Richard Allen with antebellum letters, speeches, sermons, and books reveals so many similarities in style that there can be no doubt about either the authorship or authenticity of their accounts (479).

Taking into consideration all these aspects of the Slave Narratives, we should also be careful not to limit and narrow down the scope and meaning of the narratives. As Dickson D. Bruce JR warns:

The slave narratives as a body of writing are rich in their literary and historical characteristics and implications. One should be careful never to reduce them to any single dimension. Neither should one ignore their political purposes or their political underpinnings in the context of antebellum history. Intended to present an irrefutable case against slavery, they entered into a debate that divided the nation, while resonating strongly with American political concerns. And they also did so in ways that contributed significantly to bringing slavery to an end (42)

Autobiography without a doubt is one of the most difficult forms of literary art. Not only must it be a retrospective account of the autobiographer's life but it must also be written with the utmost honesty (Sarojini 203). In autobiography the nature of truth is very complex because it is subjective rather than objective, since the autobiographer presents the truth of life as seen from inside. In American autobiography, slave narratives

have been accepted with great scepticism and resistance precisely because of this. Another reason is because Black slaves have always been perceived to be liars, thieves and drunkards in the North, therefore whatever they have to say or write is always viewed with suspicion. Frederick Douglass's act of writing his own autobiography is the result of accusations that he had never been a slave because he did not speak in the slave dialect. Douglass reveals the identity of his master in his narrative, despite the danger that his master will learn of his whereabouts, because he is convinced that without these revelations his book will be worthless as no one will take his word as the truth. Harriet Jacobs's story is so volatile that she is forced to begin her narrative by reassuring her white readers that her story is not a figment of her imagination:

Readers, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts (407).

For both Jacobs and Douglass, it is imperative that their narratives must be believed. Perhaps the greatest challenge to Black autobiographers is to find devices and strategies that will bestow the stamp of authenticity to their writings. When we examine *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* by Frederick Douglass, it is clear that these two narratives have overcome this challenge.

In his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass is forced to conform to the traditions of the time by having two white men who are also well-known abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendel Phillips, write the Preface to the book and in the process authenticate that the book had really been written by Douglass:

Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ someone else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production; and, considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave... it is in my judgement, highly creditable to his head and heart (305).

In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass breaks from tradition by having a black physician and abolitionist, Dr. James McCune Smith write the Preface. This is done deliberately because after fifteen years of living in freedom, Doug-

lass is convinced that he doesn't need a white man to authenticate his literary act and his self-hood. Harriet Jacobs's experience is different from that of Douglass. Being a woman and a runaway black slave has ensured that Jacobs's autobiography will have to pass an even more stringent test of authentication because women's experiences in slavery are not the same as that of men. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Lydia Maria Childs, a well-known abolitionist, herself wrote the Introduction:

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with it's monstrous features and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn (409-410).

Despite this introduction, Jacobs's narrative is not taken seriously for many decades by both readers and scholars because it is an exception since it represents a woman's perspective and also because for a long time scholars have suspected that white writers were involved in the production of this narrative (Ernest 219). Before *Incidents*, references to sexual abuse were few and when they were mentioned they were never described in detail. Douglass himself describes the whipping of his Aunt Hester by the overseer, Mr. Plummer. When Hester was caught in the company of a young man, a slave by the name of Llyod's Ned, she was stripped from neck to waist, her hands tied in front of her and then hung from a hook. The warm red blood that flowed from the beaten and broken body of Hester so terrified the young Douglass that he never forgot it. However his telling comment about the entire incident reveals the true reason for the overseer's anger, 'Had he been a man of pure morals himself, he might have been thought interested in protecting the innocence of my aunt; but those who knew him will not suspect him of any such virtue' (319). For the first time in *Incidents*, the issue of sexual abuse is written about not only in detail but also described candidly by the victim herself. According to William L. Andrews, it is only after extensive archival work by Jean Fagan Yellin in 1987, who proved beyond a doubt as to the authenticity of *Incidents*, that the book became a major slave narrative:

Jacobs's correspondence with Child helps lay to rest the long-standing charge against *Incidents* that it is at worst a fiction and at best the product of Child's pen, not Jacobs's. Child's letters to Jacobs and others make clear that her role as editor was no

more than she acknowledged in her introduction to *Incidents*: to ensure the orderly arrangement and directness of the narrative, without adding anything to the text or altering in any significant way Jacobs's manner of recounting her story (<https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/bio.html>).

In autobiography the writer depends wholly on his memory which at times can be treacherous and misleading. This is so because he has no control over his memory and memory sometimes can be selective and also creative. In his autobiographies, Douglass often makes no mention about certain people and incidents in his life. His childhood friendship with Daniel Llyod is given only a brief mention and even more surprising is that he makes no mention of his courtship of Anna Murray in Baltimore before announcing his marriage to her in New York a few days after his escape. All that we know about Anna before her marriage to Douglass is that she helped him financially when he made his escape to the North. His wife Anna, an illiterate, dark-complexioned and coarse woman did not fit into Douglass's world filled with outspoken and militant personalities like Amy Post and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. On the other hand his association with Daniel Llyod is deliberately played down because within the boundaries of that relationship, Douglass is only a lowly slave boy, an impression which does not sit well with the image he now wants to portray to the world. Harriet Jacob's narrative on the other hand is full of concealments because of the sensitivity of the subject and the need to protect herself, her children and her family. In her narrative, Jacobs uses a pseudonym, 'Linda Brent', to tell her story and it is Yellin who finally uncovers the true identity of all the men and women who people Jacob's narrative: Dr. Flint was James Norcom, Emily Flint was Mary Matilda Norcom, Mr. Sands was Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, and so on (Smith 193).

For both Jacobs and Douglass, it is vital that they must be seen as truth tellers because Blacks have always been seen as depraved and vicious by White America. American standards insist that autobiography must be factual which means that in Black autobiography the self must be situated on the periphery while the 'facts' must be the centre of attention. Douglass on the other hand believes in giving both the 'facts' and the 'self' equal importance because one cannot do without the other if a balanced view is to be achieved. Since autobiography is an assessment of the significance of one's life, Douglass is determined that the 'self' he reveals to the world must be worthy and complete and deserving of the name truth teller because it is only then that he will achieve full manhood. Jacobs understands fully well the complications that may arise from her

use of pseudonyms while naming the people in her narrative. She pleads with her readers to try and understand the plight of slave women who have no control over their bodies. For Jacobs, the act of exercising her right to choose the man to whom she will give up her cherished virginity and who will ultimately father her children is an expression of her indomitable spirit. While writing her life story, she understands that white societal rules will be applied as a yardstick for her actions and in the eyes of her Northern white readers, her actions may be seen as promiscuous and depraved. Yet slavery is an institution where slaves do not have any kind of autonomy over their bodies. They are seen as commodity to be bought and sold and in the case of women, they are also seen as breeders who have the potential to increase the master's stock of slaves and thereby increase his wealth. Therefore, in *Incidents*, Jacobs asks her readers to be lenient in their judgement of female slaves since, 'the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others' (466). Like Douglass, Jacobs is also determined to tell the truth no matter the consequences and in the process she proves herself to be a truth teller.

The inhumanity of man on man and the continuation of slavery and human bondage have given rise to numerous forms of protest and Black autobiography is one such example (Sarojini 209). Douglass's *Narrative* can also be called protest literature because he protests against attempts by the white dominant race to suppress his voice and reduce him to a mere puppet whom they can manipulate. Jacobs's *Incidents* is also a protest literature because in it she calls out the sexual abuse rampant in a number of Southern plantations and she also details the extreme steps she was forced to take, hiding in her grandmother's attic for seven years in order to escape the debauchery of the dissipated Dr. Flint. Black protest comes in various forms, it started on the slave ships with the slave rebellions and it matured into the act of seizing education in the face of white opposition which is one of the most powerful forms of protest. Other forms of protest range from a deliberate work slowdown to oratory and even religion when Black slaves inscribe Christianity with certain African forms of worship such as the calling out which is very popular in Black churches (Morris 26).

A recurring theme in most Black autobiography is the Black man's protest against the cruelty and injustice imposed on him by White America. This theme is seen not only in the autobiographies of the slave narrators of the 18th and 19th centuries, but also in 20th century autobiographies such as *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). A comparison between Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X reveals that the two men have a lot in common

though they belong to different centuries. Both of them are charismatic leaders and also orators of their time. Like Douglass, Malcolm is a man of complete integrity and he is not afraid to tell it as it is (Griffen 24); qualities which also shine bright in Harriet Jacobs's telling of her own story. That issues of oppression and racism have remained the same in America from the 19th century to the 20th century is indicative of the collective failure of the American nation in providing basic civil and human rights to a race of people whose forefathers were forcibly brought across the ocean against their will. As W. E. B. Du Bois puts it , 'After emancipation, for twenty years and more, so many people looked for the fulfilment of the prophecy that many actually saw it and we heard and kept hearing and now and then still hear that the Negro today is worse off than is slavery days (111).

For Douglass a potent weapon against the debilitating effects of slavery is a deliberate misreading of everything that the slaveholder stands for. A study of his life reveals that Douglass has always done the opposite of what others want him to do. In many slave narratives, the ability to read, the acquisition of literacy is treated as equivalent to the achievement of physical freedom. In the case of Harriet Jacobs, the stand she takes against her master Dr. Flint when he tries to corrupt her innocence by suggesting that she becomes his mistress with her own cottage to live in, becomes her weapon in fighting off the evil effects of slavery. Her absolute refusal to bow down to her master's desires, her act of taking a white man, Mr. Sands, as her lover and having children with him, her concealment in her grandmother's attic and subsequent flight to New York to freedom, her efforts in getting her children's father to buy them from Dr. Flint, all are Jacobs's weapons in her fight against the evils of slavery. In the *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass speaks of reading as the way he begins to define himself via defiance of his master because when Hugh Auld learns of Douglass's lessons with his wife Sophia he becomes apprehensive lest the slave becomes uncontrollable. In the case of Jacobs, her refusal to submit to her master's base desires and thereby maintain her integrity becomes the window through which she gazes at herself.

Both Jacobs and Douglass feel that writing their own autobiography is the only way for them to truly authenticate their own self. William L. Andrews writes that autobiography is "spurred by many motives, perhaps the most important of which is the need of an 'other' to declare himself through various acts..." (*The First Century* 228). For Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, autobiography is the only genre which can provide both of them with the platform to reveal to the world that people that really are, and that is both

are heroes in their own very different ways.

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