

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE DEPICTION OF 'RACISM': 'TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE' A MEMOIR BY SOLOMON NORTHUP, AND '12 YEARS A SLAVE' THE MOVIE BY STEVE MC QUEEN

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Abstract - Given that questions pertaining to the perpetuation of 'symbolic racism' and 'modern slavery' are major concerns in today's society – building barriers to social and economic participation, and leading to public exclusion – these matters have still not gained enough coverage in laudable circles as to garner activist support. Racism, in this light, has been a problem right from the administrative front of systemic segregation; i.e. when viewed from the perspective of civil society and the mainstream media. As such, it is imperative that studies on the depiction of racism in films and literature are conducted, so that a heightened level of awareness surrounding these issues might be inculcated in readers, viewers, and society at large. In hindsight, the representation of 'black' characters in movies and literature have evolved over time, and must be accounted for. Thereof, the current research paper postulates a comparison of the depiction of 'racism' & 'slavery' in *Twelve Years a Slave* a memoir by Solomon Northup, and *12 Years a Slave* the movie by Steve Mc Queen.

Keywords - Racism, Slave Narratives, Human Rights, Gender, Colorism, Ethnic Identity

I. INTRODUCTION – 'TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE'

'Racism' and 'slavery' are two acute aspects of conscious 'cultural forgetting' in the domain of memory studies, amounting to the systemic operation of 'structural amnesia' based on differences in color. Especially when viewed from the historical perspective of human rights, one notices, these issues dominate society down the ages: for instance, we still passionately speak of the abhorrent practice of 'modern slavery' in post-industrial suburbs like London, as also we notice a marked incline in 'xenophobia' on the global front, given the current era's obsession with 'walls', 'guns', 'eugenic experiments' and 'ballistic missiles'.

Literature in particular is said to mirror life, infusing the layman's rhetoric with the poise of emotion. In that a 'memoir' considered as an autobiographical mode of expression stands out as a laudable record of personal triumph under adverse situations. It is in this matrix of cultural speculation that we locate the poignant memoir of Solomon Northup, a 'free' 'black' man from Saratoga, New York, who was incarcerated in 1841, i.e. being kidnapped and sold into slavery. On his escape from illegal 'slave pens' and atrocious 'slave masters', working in the plantations of Louisiana, Northup lived to document his painful first-person narrative on being ill-treated as a slave for '12 years' in captivity; only his narrative was lost in obscurity for nearly 100 years. The memoir is as yet a record of the intricacies involved in the convoluted relationship between 'slaves' and their 'masters' in the context of hierarchical oppression.

Of late, the memoir was rediscovered in the light of a movie being made on the same subject by Steve

McQueen, 2013. The movie *12 Years a Slave* has received the Golden Globe Award for the Best Motion Picture -Drama, an Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of the year; as also, Best Writing, Best Achievement in Directing, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor and Best Supporting Actress awards in 2014. The movie, furthermore, has received the BAFTA Award for Best Film (Thomas, 2014). In retrospect, the memoir has regained its popularity after the release of the movie adapted from the real-life story, and is now the topic of study in American public high schools. To this effect, Penguin books have printed study guides along with copies of the original 1853 memoir (Frizell, 2014). Thereof, an in-depth study on the depiction of racism as presented in the memoir and the movie becomes imperative.

II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH– RACIAL STUDIES

The broad research area adopted for the study is 'qualitative analysis'. In that, the operational methodology explores the thematic portrayal of racism, i.e. a comparison of the portrayal of 'racism and slavery' – as depicted in *Twelve Years a Slave* – the memoir written by Solomon Northup and the movie directed by Steve Mc Queen. The novel *Twelve Years a Slave* consists of 22 chapters and 321 pages; whereas, the length of the movie is 2 hours and 14 minutes. As such, the book and the movie are perused from a combinatory framework of 'narratology' and 'ideological tropes'.

The narrative analysis of the texts covers the following areas: Characterization, Point-of-view, Thematic focus. The ideological tropes considered for analysis are as follows: Type of Racism - Individual racism\ Active racism\ Passive racism \Cultural

racism \ Institutional racism; White Privilege; Bigotry; Collusion; Implicit Bias; Intersectionality; Multicultural competency; Ethnic identity; Ally; Colorism; Acculturation(Potapchuk et al., 2005).

III. COMPARISON OF 'IDEOLOGICAL TROPES' – MEMOIR & MOVIE

In terms of major characters in the memoir and the movie we have the oppressed hero/protagonist Solomon Northup; Burch & Radburn, Brown & Hamilton, Freeman, Ford, Epps, Tibeats (the white oppressors); Patsey (the oppressed black slave girl); Bass & Mr. Parker (the savior allies). The mnemonic narrative on the outset is a 'survivor story' written to the tune of a discursive 'multi-linear plot'. On a broader scale, the dominant themes employed are as follows: nostalgia linked with the idea of family and ethnic roots, exile from home, the occurrence of rare friendships under bizarre existential circumstances, and the episcopal struggle to 'survive' and 'live'. The sub-themes range between – pain, disgust, shame (negative emotions) which are contrasted with the drive to find 'courage' and address hostility with 'resilience' and 'fortitude'.

Given the 'ideological tropes' applied from the domain of race theory to the texts (memoir & movie), the derivations of the study are as follows:

"Individual racism, as we use it, refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of individuals that support or perpetuate racism. Individual racism can be deliberate, or the individual may act to perpetuate or support racism without knowing that is what he or she is doing (Potapchuk et al., 2005)." "Individual racism' is observed in several contexts both in the memoir and the movie. Tibeats practices individual racism by making an attempt to hang Solomon and this scene is dramatically emphasized in the movie as presented in chapter-8 of the memoir. Similarly, Epps in one of his 'dancing moods' makes his exhausted slaves dance throughout the night, this is seen in chapter-13 of the memoir. Epps is also seen raping the slave girl Patsey in chapter-13. Here we see both Tibeats and Epps practice individual racism in their own perverted ways.

"Actions which have as their stated or explicit goal the maintenance of the system of racism and the oppression of those in targeted racial groups... People who participate in active racism advocate the continual subjugation of members in targeted racial groups and protect of 'the rights' of members of the agent group. These goals are often supported by a belief in the inferiority of 'people-of-color' and the superiority of 'white people's culture and values (Wijeyesinghe, 1997)." "Active racism' is showcased in episode-2 of the movie where Solomon is brutally beaten by Burch and Radburn; this is elaborated in chapter-3 of the memoir in a similar fashion. Other instances of 'active racism' is brought to the forefront when Tibeats come into the picture. Tibeats inflicts

brutal assaults on Solomon, even trying to hang him on a peach tree as penned in chapter-8 of the memoir. The second attempt of 'active racism' is made by Tibeats when he tries to kill Solomon by throwing a hatchet, which is presented in chapter-10 of the memoir. However, this pivotal scene is omitted in the movie. In order to escape from Tibeats's cruelty, Solomon is shown running into the swamp, a scene which is also omitted in the movie.

"Beliefs, attitudes and actions that contribute to the maintenance of racism, without openly advocating violence or oppression," points to the perpetuation of passive racism. In other words, it is "the conscious and unconscious maintenance of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that support the system of racism, racial prejudice and racial dominance (Wijeyesinghe, 1997)." "Passive racism' is seen wherever slaves openly admit to their fate, imagining the reins of their future remaining entirely in the hands of their white masters. Most of the slaves who work for Ford and Epps toil without complaining. This is clearly outlined in chapter-7 of the memoir and episode-3 of the movie where the slaves singularly work for their masters day in and day out without any attempt in protest.

Cultural racism refers to the "behaviors that reflect a worldview that overtly and covertly attributes value and normality to white people and whiteness, which devalues, stereotypes, labels people-of-color as the "other" – viewing them as "different, less than, or rendering them invisible". "Many of the behaviors of institutions and individuals that we call "patronizing" are in fact forms of cultural racism (Potapchuk et al., 2005)." "Cultural racism' is seen in chapter-6 of the memoir where Freeman changes Solomon's name to 'Platt' completely stripping away his original identity as a free individual devoid of his rights. We see this portrayal in the movie also in episode-2, where Solomon not only loses his free status, but also loses every semblance of value attached to his name.

"Institutional racism refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional policies may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites, and oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as non-white(Potapchuk et al., 2005)." "Institutional racism' is seen in the movie through the song "Run Nigger Run/ well the patty-roller will get you" sung by Tibeats, meant to instill fear among the slaves who might otherwise plan to run away from work. The song as a euphemism can be co-related with the role of patrollers who catch runaway slaves in chapter-17 of the memoir. Moreover, in chapter-9 of the memoir, Peter Tanner is seen citing the Bible wrongly to inculcate discipline among the slaves. But in the movie the character Peter Tanner is combined with that of Epps, whereof Epps is seen preaching in episode-3 of the movie instead of Peter Tanner. Here we see white

men misusing the scripture in order to institutionalize racism.

“White privilege” refers to the myriad social advantages, benefits, and courtesies that come with being a member of the dominant race (Potapchuk et al., 2005). “White privilege” is portrayed through gruesome scenes of colored men and women being displayed like cattle for sale in Freeman’s slave pen. White men are seen getting the privilege of purchasing black people as domesticated slaves as documented in chapter-6 of the memoir. The white men are also given the privilege to have as many so called black ‘keeps’ or black ‘mistresses’ as they wanted. Armsby being a white laborer was forgiven by Epps for not achieving his daily target in cotton picking, as is seen in Episode-3 of the movie. Meanwhile, Solomon gets whipped time and again for not fulfilling his daily quota. However the particular story of Armsby receiving special treatment from Epps is not mentioned in the book. In chapter-18 of the memoir we see Harriet, a black mistress of Master Shaw, who enjoys all the privileges of the whites. Episode-3 showcases Mistress Shaw sitting on a table enjoying a cup of tea with sugar and cake. These privileges are deemed out of reach in a black slave’s life. In chapter-18 Patsey, a young *mulatto* maiden, is beaten by Epps for fetching a piece of scented soap from Mistress Shaw. We see Patsey is even reprimanded for seeking a basic necessity such as a soap. The white skinned folk on the contrary have the privilege to get educated whereas the people of colored race are not allowed to receive any formal education. In chapter-16 of the memoir, Epps prohibits Solomon from reading or writing, and threatens Solomon with hundred lashes if he finds him engaged in such activities. However, in the movie, it’s Mistress Epps prohibiting Solomon from reading or writing anything. At a tangent, the white people possess the privilege to conduct fancy parties where black people would take a corner and play the role of ‘entertainers’ like zoo animals. This is specified in chapter-20 of the memoir and portrayed in episode-3 of the movie. Colored people always played the roles of manual laborers who toiled in the fields and kitchen alike. In contrast, the white masters are always seen as supervisors, estate owners and managers who dole out instructions from elevated positions. Additionally, white people at any point held the privilege to catch and imprison a runaway slave. In chapter-17 we see patrollers who come and capture Wiley for being found outside the plantation without the pass. However, Wiley’s story is conveniently omitted in the movie.

A ‘bigot’ is one who is “obstinately or intolerantly devoted to his church, party, belief, or opinion.” Bigotry in the context of this statement is a rigid intolerance of differences. It is the blind unreasoned intolerance that makes racial and religious torture a form of discrimination. “When manifested in violent or intimidating ways, racial and religious bigotry

represent the desire to deny the rights and freedom of persons of different creed, color, race, or national origin” (*Intimidation of violence*, 1983). ‘Bigotry’ is seen in chapter-3 where Burch and Radburn force Solomon to forget his true identity as a free man by whipping him mercilessly. The same is portrayed in the movie in Episode-2. When Solomon works for Tibeats, he is subjected to brutal treatment where Tibeats nearly tries to hang Solomon. This is shown in episode-3 of the movie. Again, in chapter-10 of the memoir, Tibeats tries to murder Solomon the second time using a hatchet. However this scene is omitted in the movie. In chapter-17 we see Epps giving brutal whippings to Wiley for running away, and he nearly stabs Uncle Abram to death in chapter-18 for being forgetful. The movie completely eliminates the roles of Wiley and Uncle Abram. In chapter-20, Solomon is whipped for oversleeping and this is omitted in the movie.

‘Collusion’ is used to express opprobrium when describing two or more people collaborating covertly to bring about racial inequity or injustice. By ‘inequity’ Lauer includes “circumstances that feature an imbalance between the value that parties have brought to a contracted relationship and the value that each derives in exchange from that relationship” (Lauer, 2016). ‘Collusion’ is seen in chapter-2 of the memoir when Brown and Hamilton trick Solomon to accompany them to Washington where they drug him and sell him into slavery. This scene is portrayed in episode-2 of the movie. ‘Collusion’ is also seen in chapter-3 of the memoir when Burch and Radburn hit Solomon to make him accept that he is not a free man anymore. In the movie, this is portrayed in episode-2. We see more of ‘collusion’ in chapter-8 of the memoir when Tibeats accompanied by two of his friends tries to hang Solomon out of revenge. This scene of Solomon partially hanging from the tree has been emphasized in the episode-3 of the movie.

Also known as implicit social cognition, ‘implicit bias’ refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control. ‘Implicit bias’ is seen practiced by Master Ford on his slaves. Though Ford appears to be a nice man, he is bound to follow the norms of the system in which he lives. Ford’s character is portrayed in the episode-3 of the movie, as described by Solomon in chapter-7 of his memoir.

Delgado (2001) in his work on *Critical Race Theory* defines ‘Intersectionality’ as the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings. Eliza is seen as a victim of ‘intersectionality’ in chapter-11 of the memoir, after she is sold to Peter Compton. Here she dies because of harsh treatment and misery. However Eliza’s death is not shown in

the movie. Same goes with a character named Celeste who was Cary's slave girl mentioned in chapter-17: she goes through 'intersectionality' in a similar fashion. Even Celeste's role is omitted from the movie. Patsey the slave girl of Epps suffers from 'intersectionality' the most because of her being a minor. Patsey is also seen raped by Epps in the episode-3 of the movie.

Multicultural competency is all about understanding and participating in a multicultural process by learning how to become allies, interacting with people from other cultures and thereby 'becoming culturally competent' (Kivel, 2007). 'Multicultural competency' is seen in episode-1 of the movie where Solomon is a free man living a decent life in Saratoga who is able to interact in all circles. In Saratoga, both white men and black men are at par as viewed in chapter-1 of the memoir. At a later stage, 'multicultural competency' is only seen in chapter-19 when Bass come into the picture. Bass argues with Epps on the topic of racism. This is seen in episode-3 of the movie.

Certain factors such as common descent, attitudes, physical characteristics of a particular social culture, all combine to form one's ethnic identity. Social qualities like particular beliefs, religion, practices, and dialect regularly shape the bases of one's identity. In a few cases, physical properties such as pigmentation of the skin or body shape construe the 'foundation of ethnic identity' (Regmi, 2003). 'Ethnic identity' is seen in chapter-15 where the slaves are allowed to wear clean clothes only on Christmas. The ladies of the African race could be easily identified via identification with the red scarf or ribbon covering their heads. Another aspect of 'ethnic identity' can be seen through the dialects of the people belonging to the black race. This can be identified by the dialogues uttered by aunt Phebe and Patsey in chapter-21. However, in episode-3 of the movie we can only see the dialogues of Patsey.

An 'ally' is someone committed to make an effort to help the oppressed groups recognize their privileges based on gender, sexuality, race or class in order to bring them justice. Allies create awareness of oppression and fight to bring all forms of oppression to an end. The first 'ally' to Solomon is a sailor named John Manning who appears in chapter-5 of the memoir. Manning helps Solomon by posting letters to his family on his behalf. The role of Manning is omitted in the movie. The second 'ally' is Solomon's first master. He becomes an 'ally' just because he is kind to Solomon, and on one occasion as mentioned in chapter-9, he saves Solomon from Tibbeats's scheme of hanging. This is portrayed in episode-3 of the movie. However, Ford does not free Solomon from slavery. The third 'ally' is a carpenter named Bass who appears in chapter-19 of the memoir. Bass is the one who finally discloses Solomon's location to his friends in the North. This is shown in the episode-3 of the movie. Solomon's final ally is Henry

Northup who comes all the way to the south and delivers Solomon from the clutches of slavery. This is showcased in chapter-21 of the memoir. However, in the movie, Mr. Parker, the owner of the general store comes to rescue Solomon.

"Colorism is a worldwide phenomenon of discrimination wherein people are given certain status and privilege based on the physical features of skin color, facial features, hair texture, and the like. Within the African American community this is a topic with a long and painful history and with lasting implications. Because colorism is an internalized system of hegemonic control within the African American community, preference for lighter skinned Blacks is widely discussed (Steele, 2016)." "Colorism" as a visual motif is distinctly seen in episode-1 of the movie when a black man enters Parker's shop after seeing Solomon being treated as a gentleman. This scene is nowhere mentioned in the book.

"The acculturation process involves adopting or acquiring the language, customs, values, habits, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyle of the dominant culture or nonnative society (Benuto et al., pp. 218)." "Acculturation" is seen in chapter-17 of the memoir where Solomon helps a white man named Adam Taydem to catch a bunch of runaway slaves. However, this scene is omitted in the movie.

Given the canvas of contrast between the memoir and the movie, one can say, the memoir alone pays an honest tribute to Solomon's experience. Although, the movie when perceived as a visual medium helps the lay man conceptualize and feel the horrors described in the memoir with a deeper impact.

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