
Slavery as A Mindset in Soloman Northup's *12 Years A Slave*

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Article Received: 10/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 14/06/2025**Published Online:** 15/06/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.06.204

Abstract:

Slavery as A Mindset in Soloman Northup's *12 Years A Slave* Mr. Bhuvnesh Swami Assistant Professor English, Govt. College Phalodi, Rajasthan ABSTRACT Slavery, the notorious offspring of colonial legacy encompasses much more than the picture of a black slave with a lash stricken back or an African woman breaking her back at a cotton plantation. All this time, the colonial phenomenon and the system of slavery were projected as a physical reality that governed the path of history. But more than that, colonialism and slavery are psychological, stemming from a mindset that was born out of the binary paradigm of domination and subordination. It is both complicated and unnerving. This work attempts to validate this argument by carrying out a cross sectional reading of Solomon Northup's *12 Years A Slave*.

Key Words: Colonialism, slavery, dehumanization, racism, south America, North America, internalized slavery, power politics, Marxism, Northup, Orientalism, Post Colonialism

INTRODUCTION: "The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others." (Thiong'o, 1986)

This has always been the hallmark of colonialism: a multifaceted amalgamation of affluence, plunder, authority, governance, domination, devastation, and oppression.

During the time when the empire wrote back, the works emerged in resistance of the colonial process were the most intimate expressions of endurance, realisation and resistance. The anguish and trauma they had unravelled in front of the world gradually moulded the exterior of the theoretical framework in a way that whenever an intriguing light was shown upon the topic, these attributes were first to shine. But words like that of Thiong'o makes us delve deeper in to the underlying complicated folds of the topic. Not only that of colonialism but its resulting phenomenon as well, the prominent among the list being the institution of slavery. Slavery is that indefensible progeny of colonialism, which was potent enough, to shape the course of the world in the recent centuries. Both colonialism and slavery are two unavoidable pages in the yellow book of history, especially with its everlasting consequences.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF SLAVERY

The question "How it was possible for a country as small as Britain to be able to retain their monopoly and power over all these continents for centuries and how American masters were able to keep people twice their strength at their mercy with little successful resistance?" corresponds with what Thiong'o have stated here. Because more than a physical reality, colonialism and slavery were psychological manipulation strategies. All this time, colonialism and the subsequent institution of slavery perceived and critiqued through the prism of it being a terrible and unjustifiable reality which had altered the power and social dynamics of not only the participating nations but the world itself. Many critics like Niall Ferguson and Andrew Roberts have tried to whitewash the process by projecting its positive attributes. Ferguson in his works *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (2002) and *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011) defends the imperial and colonial process by putting forth a set of arguments claiming the processes had made globalisation and multiculturalism possible thus were the driving force behind overall Global development in social, economic and cultural aspects. He also claims colonialism had enabled the greatest philosophical values, ideologies and institutions to spread across the continents possible. Though, in a sense, his arguments have considerable merit, they still do not blur the bigger picture, particularly what it had caused the Africans. Ferguson's arguments lose their validity when we view the entire phenomenon via a psychological spectacle. There is much more to colonialism than Britain draining the colonies' wealth and power and there is much more to the institution of slavery than bony African men and women breaking their backs at cotton and sugar plantations and children and elders cowering at the sight of a white man's whip. The theorists like Edward Said and Homi K Bhabha had deciphered the mental process underlying

colonialism, and post colonial literary theory and criticism evolved with their theories as its backbone. This paper focuses particularly on the aspects of slavery and its psychological dimensions with reference to Solomon Northup's classic slave narrative *12 Years a Slave*. Institutionalized slavery has been a hallmark of colonialism. Thus, one could examine it under the lenses of Post colonial literary criticism. It is impossible to justify slavery as Ferguson had defended colonialism, especially that existed in America. Though institutionalised slavery was established during the colonial era, it was carried on to the majority by Americans. For centuries, millions of Africans, children and adults and elderly, both women and men, were transported to the lands of America through Trans-Atlantic route for the slave trade. America, a former British colony, was accustomed with horrendous realities of slaves living in subordination. Africans were shipped there to clear the untamed wild lands of America for inhabitancy but as Americans gained self-sufficiency, they rebelled against the imperial rule. Americans' opportunist mindset could be clearly seen when they occupied the colonisers' role and put Africans in their previous position. It is ironic how they had built the nation, which proclaimed itself as the paragon of freedom and individual rights, on the lash-stricken backs of their unfortunate slaves.

SLAVERY AS A MINDSET

12 Years a Slave presents the reader with the social and economic realities of that time, particularly that of South America. They required slaves for physically exerting works but were too prideful and ambitious to do it in the right way. Thus, they had injected the colonial mindset which prompts a man to think with his colour and race than mind and intellect into the unsuspecting minds of the Africans. It is a deeply ingrained system of dehumanization and monopolistic power politics that is both political and cultural, social and economic; The internalized slavery that existed in the lands of Americas during the 19th and 20th centuries prompts the readers to view it through the prisms of Saidian theory of binary division and Marxian false consciousness. *12 Years a Slave* presents us with the lives of numerous victims of internalized slavery who believes themselves as worthless and inferior. Almost all the slaves under master Ford and Edwin Epps were born into the institution of slavery, thus the generations of mental and physical abuse, dehumanization and trauma had made them unable to think and act out of the web that had ensnared their minds. Despite their wish to be out of the system, as described by Northup as he talks about Patsy, a young abused slave girl's dream;

"Far away, to her fancy an immeasurable distance, she knew there was a land of freedom. A thousand times she had heard that somewhere in the distant North there were no slaves- no masters. In her imagination it was an enchanted region,

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paradises of the earth. To dwell where the black man may work for himself - live in his own cabin - till his own soil, was the a blissful of Patsey's - a dream, alas! fulfillment of which she can never realize." (195)

It should be noted how nothing else existed for them except for the work they set out for with their masters and the torment they endured, all these covered with a persistent sense of fear and pain. Though in pain, none of the characters, except Northup, reacts against the pain they are put through, but silently suffer it as a part of their lives and it is where the aspect of internalised slavery enters the picture. There is a sense of power and subordination in the minds of both the master and the slave respectively, especially in South America. Like a slave believes it is their fate to serve their master and the white men genuinely believe it is their right and duty to rule over the slaves and keep them in check. Even master Ford who is portrayed as a kind and compassionate master, defends slavery for Northup speaks of his disposition as "

In my opinion, there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford. The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different."(75)

It is the outcome of that mindset instilled upon them which conditioned people like Mr. Ford, Tibbeats and Master Epps. The age-old conditioning, as Said discusses in his *Orientalism*, had rendered both blacks and whites incapable of realising what has been happening in their lives were all wrong and unjustifiable in more than one way. In the eyes of the white, slaves held no value other than that of a property to be used. The moment Northup was kidnapped, his value was reduced to that of a tangible asset, a commodity, a healthy and strong black man who could be of great demand in the market; the considerations he received over the 12 years as a slave serve as evidence for this claim. The debasement and dehumanization that so casually occurred in the auction houses highlights how profoundly and blindingly the mindset had changed people to a point where they are unable to even spare the children out of it and how wretched is the mentality which justify stabbing of an old man with no particular reason and whipping a fellow being till their body rips apart. The monstrous face of the system is evident when Northup casually states "On one occasion the drunken madman thought to amuse himself by cutting my throat." (171) Correlating this with the Marxian False Consciousness, the African slaves are under a false

belief of subordination which arises out of lack of awareness. They are unaware of the fact that they are the victims of a notorious social system and they have no obligation to live under the whims of their white masters and are influenced by the manipulative white dominated ideology. This lack of awareness arises out of lack of education and Northup's work proves this claim with the contradictory depiction of North and South Americas. Southern agrarian society focused only on their economic growth while North America had a multifaceted stance and calibre in many dimensions of living including industrial and intellectual aspects. The gap and difference in the perspectives of these both fractions could be analysed by placing Northup and other characters in the work parallel to each other. Michel Foucault's theories discuss how a man's ability to hold a discourse and maintain power in society is demonstrated by his access to knowledge and language. But the implied meaning of this theoretical framework centers around the idea of subordination because to exercise this power there must be a group which lacks these aforementioned accesses; people who are uneducated and oblivious, people who only listen and obey. Many a times the power hierarchies are built on the imbalance of intellectual capacity of the fractions involved in society. Given that the whites had taken advantage of the obliviousness of the blacks, especially in South America, it will not be wrong to say the system of slavery is highly political. Although Northup was smart enough to keep his silence after receiving his first whipping, he never gave up but persisted to get himself out of slavery, simultaneously prioritising his safety by working in a way he was favoured and safe. Eventually he was rescued because he knew there was a world outside and acted accordingly when given a chance but still Northup had to wait for nine years and being too watchful and alert before he had the "good fortune of obtaining a sheet of paper." (173) 'Chance' is a crucial word in this context because neither Patsey nor any others of the similar situation had it, or they were not aware of it. The white masters feared knowledge, they feared for the day when truth would replace the mindset they stamped on the Africans. They kept their 'niggers' in dark because they didn't want them to realise their real potential and rebel against them. According to the whites, the duty of Africans was to work for them, to do the chores they were bought for and that require neither education nor conscience but strength and agility. The only way to keep them in check was through inflicting fear and pain and for that, whips, guns, blood hounds and flogs became their weapons. The masters kept their controlling thread by continuously reminding the slaves constantly how running away and disobeying the masters are the worst crimes a Negro could ever commit. But the eeriness of the system does not spare anyone, for even Northup, who is aware of the strategies of the slave system, exhibits fear of never getting out of this system as he gets more involved with it. It is the point where slavery transcends its form as a physical reality and turns psychological. If Northup, who was temporarily trapped in the system is like this, one could only imagine how

the mental state of those who had spent their entire life as a part of this system would be. Transcending the limits of a memoir, a documentation of the first-hand experience of a notorious system, *12 Years A Slave* is a testimony how the institution of a slavery was a dehumanizing, misogynistic, manipulative, racist, cavity which rendered the white dominated world blind of its everlasting consequences.

CONCLUSION

12 Years a Slave is a documentation of a brutal reality, the wretchedness of a system that was once a pathway of loot and social subjugation. Though slavery had come to an end legally yet the mindset is impossible to be flushed of the minds of people even at this time and date. Lincoln had put an end to the physical system but the embers of it had emerged during the 20th century in the form of the Apartheid, the institutionalised racial segregation that shook the base of South Africa and Sout West Africa for decades. The gap between Black and White was highlighted with several legal decrees and mass imprisonments of those who raised their voices against the injustice, Nelson Mandela being prominent among them. The system came to an end with the century but in this time and space where the world boasts over the advancement of science and technology and chants over the mantra of intellectual and emotional progression, the seeds are still there in the shape and form of systemic racism. The physical system is subject to decay, the strong voices like Lincoln and Mandela could put an end to the respective discriminatory systems proves this, but the infection that plagued the mind could never be healed completely. If time and the progressive mentality of the modern generation could heal the age-old cavity that infected the minds of people, there would not have been a campaign titled Black Lives Matter. Slavery is a mindset, which is still there in a corner of many minds, taking up different names, characteristic, features and pictures but underneath all layers there is still a cavity eating up the minds but hopefully one day to be totally extracted out of the minds and actions by its roots.

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