

Blacks' Reactions Toward Slavery as Seen in *12 Years A Slave*

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Abstract

This research discusses *12 Years A Slave* movie. It tries to reveal the real life of slaves in slavery time, how the Blacks and Whites are characterized, and the Blacks' reactions toward slavery. This research applies qualitative method by using socio-historical approach. The primary data is the movie, and the secondary data are from books, encyclopedia, and internet. There are three findings. First, slavery is clearly pictured by inhuman treatment and legalized violence. Second, the Whites were characterized as the slavers and the Blacks had to suffer the slaves. Third, there are five reactions of Blacks toward racism; fighting back, submitting themselves, falling into despair and willing to die, revealing, and hiding their real identity.

Keywords: *Slave, slavery, reactions*

INTRODUCTION

Slavery began when the first twenty Africans were brought to America, exactly in Virginia in 1619. It responded the massive agriculture. The increasing role in trade, especially with British, stimulated the expansion of plantations such as

tobacco, sugar, and cotton. The plantation owners themselves mostly preferred the Black slaves as they were cheaper and could work harder than the indentured Whites.

The expansion of plantations meant more labor needed. This later promoted the importation of more slaves. Slaves and slavery soon became important for economy foundation of America. To make sure that slaves and slavery profited the plantation owners, they were later legalized and institutionalized.

Their roles in the development of America economy did not mean they got appreciated. Slaves were frequently mistreated and tortured. Their owners could do anything to them since they were considered as properties. And since slaves and slavery had been legal, the slaves nearly had no legal rights to fight back. Any kind of refusing, opposing, or even fighting back the Whites was considered against the law. Working unpaid, eating inappropriate food, getting whipped and being abused sexually were normal things. Those unwanted conditions, of course, against humanity.

The cruelty the slaves had to face, the elimination of their rights were exploitation on human beings. Those thoughts later emerged the movement of anti-slavery. Many people later united and tried to fight against this inhumanity. They expressed their refusal and resistance to abolish slavery on the entire world.

To see how people survived and struggled the slavery, *12 Years A Slave* is a good example. *12 Years a Slave* is a true story novel by Solomon Northup. It was firstly published in 1853. In 2013 the novel was later filmed. *12 Years a Slave* is chosen in this research because it clearly describes and brilliantly provides the real suffering of Blacks in slavery time. However, the most important point, this movie also tells how the Blacks deal and survive the slavery.

Character and Characterization

1. Characters

Characters and their roles are very important to support the research analysis. Characters are the people presented in a work. They are interpreted by readers or audiences as being endowed with moral, dispositional, and emotional qualities that are expressed in what they say through the dialogues and what they do through action (Abram, 1985:23). The numbers of characters in every literary work are various. But what is more important is that each character must be different from others. This is according to Rohrberger and Woods (1971:20) state in their book, “characters have particular personalities and physical attributes that distinguish them from other characters,”.

Characters in literature can be divided into two; flat and round characters. Flat characters may remain essentially stable, or

unchanged in outlook and disposition, from the beginning to the end. They have only one trait and are usually simple and static. Round characters, on the other hand, embody several or even many traits that cohere to form a complex personality. They are likely to be dynamic, changing considerably as the story goes on.

2. Characterization

Characterization is the representation of a character, whether by direct description, by showing the character in action, or by the presentation of other characters who help to define each other (Abrams, 1985: 338). Rohrberger and Woods explain that characterization is the process by which an author creates a character. They continue, there are two principal of characterization. The first is direct means to describe such as physical appearance, and moral attributes. And the second is the dramatic which means placing a character in his or her situation to show what she or he is by the way she behaves or speaks (1971: 20).

Characterization is meant to help readers in understanding the character’s reasons for doing certain things. Moreover, the readers will be emotionally involved when they read the story. In a movie, the characterization can be observed from what the characters say and do, and what the other characters say and do about the characters.

The writer uses socio-historical approach in this research. This approach sees a literary work as a reflection of the society or the author's life and times in the work (Guerrin, 2005: 51). This approach tries to find and explain the connection between the society and the history during a certain time told in the literary work. The setting of time and author's background will help readers or audience to a better understanding of any movies (Guerrin, 2005: 52).

Discussion

It can be said that slavery is the dominating topic of *12 Years A Slave*. The movie provided the answers for three problems formulated before. It clearly described the slavery in the South. It also showed us how the Blacks and Whites were pictured at that time. And the last, it told us the reactions of the Blacks in facing slavery.

A. Slavery in 12 Years A Slave

Inhuman conducts toward slaves are the prominent character of slavery. It was clearly pictured in *12 Years A Slave*. Inhuman conducts happened and increased because the Whites were legally protected for their wrong doings.

1. Inhuman treatment

The movie started in Saratoga in 1841, or 33 years after slave importation was forbidden. This was the time when Southern Whites had to find

other ways to supply the labor. One of infamous ways was by kidnapping.

The Whites came to the North, offering the potential Black victims some well-and-tempting paid jobs. This happened to Solomon. He was offered a job to play violin in a circus in Washington by two White men, Hamilton and Brown. In Washington he later realized that he had been cheated and tricked. He found himself chained and cuffed. When he was awake, he was beaten. He tried to clarify who he was, but this only made him beaten and beaten again. He was coerced to be Platt, a run-away-slave from Georgia. The same thing also happened with the others. They were forced to admit their new identities as run-away-slaves from the South. Any denial and attempts to clarify were useless and endangered their lives.

Slavery also increased sexual abuses and physical tortures. Any Black who tried to prevent these from happening, risked their lives. Sexual abuses committed to the female Blacks even when they had not become slaves. In the ship on their way to South, a White crew came to Eliza, the Black woman who had been kidnapped with her children. The crew tried to have intercourse with her. Another Black man saw this and tried to hamper him. Unfortunately, the Black was stabbed to death. Sexual abuses could also be observed from Patsey, who seemed to be the most beloved slave of Mr. Epps. Patsey had no choice but to let Mr. Epps do anything he liked. If she rejected or

refused to have sexual intercourse, it might put her into death.

Unlike sexual abuses which happened only to women, physical tortures were committed regardless sex. They also happened anywhere regardless the condition of the slaves. When in the cotton plantation, Solomon saw many of the slaves were whipped to work. They were whipped if they could not pick cotton as targeted, which was 200 pounds. Solomon and the others once could not pick as targeted. The foremen later whipped them. The slaves would also be whipped if they looked slow to work, regardless their health condition.

Physical tortures did not only relate to the slaves' performance at workplaces but also to the personal emotions or feelings of the Whites toward the Blacks. We can see this through Solomon and Patsey. Tibeats, Solomon's foreman when he worked for Mr. Ford, seemed to dislike Solomon so much. He tried many times to pick Solomon's holes. He messed things that Solomon had done. When Solomon defended himself, he called his White friends to kill Solomon. In case of Patsey, Mrs. Epps really hated her because her husband liked, loved, and was sexually interested in Patsey. She saw Patsey as the cause of her family disharmony. She once threw a glass bottle to Patsey's face and asked her husband to sell her, *"Sell her! You will remove that Black bitch from this property, 'er I'll take myself back to Cheneyville"*.

Another deadly treatment toward the Blacks was lynching. Many Whites lynched the Blacks whom they considered rebelling. In case of Solomon, he was almost died being lynched as he fought defending himself from Tibeats. Having failed, Tibeats called his friends and tried to lynch him. In another case, Solomon also witness some White men lynched two Blacks.

Appreciation on the Blacks' hard work to support Southern Whites' economy was rarely found. The slaves worked all day for their White masters but their primary needs were really inappropriate. The slaves ate the different food, which was really heartbreaking, both in types and portion. They were not provided proper shelter. Solomon and the other slaves, men and women, had to sleep in a very crowded one-room house, without mattress or pillow. When all of them slept on the floor, there was no space to relax.

Still, one of the cruelties in slavery time is that slaves were considered as properties, not as human. The Whites treated them as something instead of someone. This was clear from their kidnapping until their enslavement in the plantation. When they arrived at the harbor in the South, there were Blacks being auctioned. Some of them, just like Solomon and the other Blacks in the same ship, were later brought in to the house of auction. They were asked to clean their body. They were later displayed to be sold. Some of them wore clothes, some did not. Most of the buyers were White plantation owners. The seller

and buyers did the bargaining just like people in the market right now. Once they bought the slaves, they did not only have the full right of ownership but also life or death of the slaves.

2. Legalized violence

The point of slavery was to support US' economy, especially the South. To have things as wanted or planned, the Whites needed legal protection to optimize their slaves' performance by any means.

The legal protection meant that the slave owners were free to do anything to their slaves. The institutionalized slavery and Slave Codes enabled the Whites to fully control the Blacks. All of these allowed them to mistreat any Black, not only their own slaves but also every Black. If they saw a Black worked slowly though he or she was sick, they were allowed to whip. They tortured though the Black did nothing wrong. They could just pursue and lynch the Blacks they disliked. All of these wrong doings were legally correct. From the beginning until the end, there seemed no worry of torturing the Blacks.

Still, legalized slavery and Slave Codes also omitted and eliminated the human fundamental right, which was the access to education. The Slave Codes prohibited slaves from learning to write and read. What they ordered to do was just to work. This was emphasized by the dialogue between Solomon and Mrs. Epps.

Mrs. Epps : *"He (Solomon's pervious master) learn yah ta read?"*

Solomon : *"A word here or there but I have no understanding of the written text."*

Mrs. Epps : *"Don't trouble yer self with it. Same as the rest, Master bought yah to work. Tha's all. And any more'll earn yah a hun'red lashes"*

Being an educated slave was a danger for any Black. This was why Solomon was suggested to keep his identity in secret; not to tell anybody that he could either write or read, *"If you want to survive, do and say as little as possible. Tell no one who really you are, and tell no one that you can write or read. Unless you want to be a dead nigger"*.

The explanations above imply that violence exist because it was legally protected. It did not just protect the doers. For the victims, it also bore the fear of fighting for the justice.

B. Blacks and Whites

It can be assumed that Whites were mostly cruel and the Blacks suffered of their doings. But it is important to see some differently real things about the Blacks and Whites.

1. Blacks

a. The Northern Blacks in the North

In the beginning the movie showed the daily life of Blacks in Saratoga. As part of the North America, equality was highly respected and slavery was really rejected here. The Blacks mostly lived as the Whites did. They shared the tastes almost in everything; food, fashion, gestures, etc. It was hardly found things that differentiated Blacks and

Whites. In general, Blacks and Whites lived in harmony.

Before Solomon was kidnapped, people could see him and his wife went to the market. They dressed in White's style. We could also see that there were so many Blacks dressing in White's style. The Blacks kidnapped that Solomon met also dressed just as the Whites. When they entered the shop where they were looking for fabric, the shop owner offered them 'pure silk by way of France'. All of these showed that their taste on fashion just like other Whites.

Regarding to shelter, Solomon and his family lived in a house which mostly Whites lived in. Still, the Blacks also adapted White's gestures. These were shown by the way they greeted. Solomon touched his hat and bowed his head when he met and greeted the others. Another scene that could clearly picture this was when Solomon had dinner with Hamilton and Brown, the men who tricked and trapped him. They ate with candle and had the Western menu. The way they enjoyed the dinner implied that the Blacks did not only become familiar with the White's culture, but were also able to perform it naturally.

b. Blacks in the South

The Blacks in the South had a very different life with those in the North. Nearly all of them lived as slaves. They worked at their owners' homes and plantations. The slaves who worked at their owners' homes as the domestic helpers enjoyed better lives. They could eat what their

owners ate, sleep at the same home, and enjoy the family things.

On the contrary, the slaves at the plantations must hardly struggle for their lives. They were given target at workplace. They would be punished if they could not reach the target or they gained less than the previous day. This happened to Solomon when he picked less than 200 pounds of cotton and the others who picked less than the previous days. They were whipped.

Blacks also became the victims of White's violence and brutality. Whipping was common and lynching frequently found. Blacks were tortured not only because of their mistakes but also because of Whites' personal emotion. These two events clearly showed this idea: Mrs. Epps used to hurt Patey and Tibbeats seemed to always pick Solomon's holes. Those situations forced the Blacks to perform as good as possible for their masters. They would be thankful and promised to be loyal when they had good-hearted Masters. This was what Eliza said to Mr. Ford, "*You will have the most faithful slave in me*".

The aim of being loyal did not only to please the Masters, but also to avoid them being transferred or diverted to other Masters, who could be worse or meaner. Solomon found himself in worse condition after Mr. Ford diverted him to Mr. Epps.

Still, the troubles that the Blacks had to deal with forced and formed them to be strong people. They chose to be whipped or tortured instead of

rebel. They preferred to be submissive to fighting back. Rebelling or fighting back would only bring them into greater miseries. Moreover, it was illegal for any Slave to fight back. To accept lashes and other physical tortures would help them to survive. They believe when they survived, they had chance to meet their family again. There was debate between Eliza and Solomon. Solomon rebuked Eliza since she did not stop crying. Eliza later accused him of not missing his family and he only enriched Mr. Ford, their owner. Eliza's words made him so angry, "*I survive. I will not fall into despair! I will offer up my talents to Master Ford. I will keep myself hearty until freedom is opportune!.... My back is thick with scars from protesting my freedom. Do not accuse me*".

Besides the above characteristics, *12 Years A Slave* also provided Black characters who were on the contrary with the most Blacks in the South. The first one was the foreman who worked for Mr. Epps. Most foremen were White. The White masters did not easily trust someone to be a foreman. When a Black was pointed to be a foreman, this meant that the Black had shown his hard-work, loyalty, even life for his White Master. So, when a Black became a foreman, it did not only mean that he had shown his obedience as a Black but also his ability to perform what a White should do to the Blacks. In other words, he should be able to undoubtedly whip and torture the other Blacks, who were his own people.

The second was Mrs. Shawn. The conversation between Solomon and Mrs. Shawn when he came to tell Patsey that she was called by Mr. Epps would show us a very different Black. When Solomon approached them, Mrs. Shawn greeted him "*nigger Platt*". It was really surprising since she was also a Black. She should address the other Blacks more appropriately. Mrs. Shawn later asked Solomon to sit and offered him to drink. But Solomon was really reluctant. "*Thank you Mistress but I don't dare*" answered Solomon. His answer implied that this kind of Black person was really treated completely as a Southern White. Mrs. Shawn also told that she had once suffered, just like other Blacks, "*I ain't felt the end of a lash in 'mo years than I cain recall. Ain't worked a field, neither. Where one time I served, now I got others servin' me. The cost to my current existence be Massa Shawn broadcasting his affections, and me enjoyin' his pantomime of fidelity. If that what keep me from the cotton pickin' niggers, that what it be*". She continue that all she got was the result of her loyalty, "*A small and reasonable price to be paid 'fo sure.*" She also told and asked Patsey to be strong. She convinced her that God would help her to find a way to be like her. There should be no worry of Mr. Epps's sexual abuse over her, "*I knowed what it like to be the object of Massa's redilections and peculiarities. A lusty visit in the night, or a visitation from the whip. And you take comfort, Patsey; the Good Lord will manage Epps. In His own time the Good Lord will manage dem*

all. ...the curse on the Pharos is a poor example of all that wait 'fo the plantation class." The conversation between Mrs. Shawn, Solomon, and Patsey implied that the Black who was married to a White, tended to speak and behave just as the most White in the South.

2. White

a. White in the North

The movie started in Saratoga, where Solomon and his family lived. The interaction between Solomon and other Whites, in the market, park, etc, showed that the Whites treated the Blacks just like they treated the Whites. There was no barrier for inter-racial interaction.

b. Whites in the South

South America really supported slavery. It issued law to force the Blacks to obey and dedicate their lives for the White masters. These laws later enabled and allowed the White masters to do anything toward the Blacks, especially when the Blacks were considered rebelling. Mr. Epps read the law as the new slaves came to his place to start working for him, *"And that servant which knew his Lord's will WHICH KNEW HIS LORD'S WILL; and prepared not himself. PREPARED NOT HIMSELF, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. D'ye hear that? "Stripes." That nigger that don't obey his lord - that's his master - d'ye see? that 'ere nigger shall be beaten with many stripes. Now, "many" signifies a great many. Forty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty*

lashes. That's Scrippter!" Mr. Epps truly cling on this law. He was so mean and easily got angry over his slaves. Whipping was a daily view on his plantation. He also often abused Patsey sexually.

12 Years A Slave clearly showed the arbitrary conducts of the southern Whites. Their brutality was even shown when Solomon and other kidnapped Blacks were still in Washington, North America. When they arrived in the harbor in the South, Solomon was beaten and forced to be named as Platt. Bad performance at workplace would result whipping. Personal disliking might lead to physical tortures as Tibeat and Mrs. Epps committed to Solomon and Patsey.

Though *12 Years A Slave* showed the cruelty of the Whites, it still provided some different Southern White characters. We could observe this through some characters. First is Mr. Ford. Mr. Ford was a kind man. He tried to help Eliza to keep united with her children. He expressed his willingness to buy Eliza with her children, but the slave trader refused because the little girl would be more valuable if she was sold grown-up. Mr. Fords was also an open-minded. He listened to Solomon's ideas on how to transport the wood by the water, so the production cost could be lowered. This idea was firstly rejected by Tibeats the foreman. Mr. Ford also rewarded him a violin. Later, he transferred his ownership over Solomon to Mr. Epps. He knew somehow Tibeats somehow would kill him. And transferring Solomon to cruel Mr.Epps, who was also feared by many Whites,

would help Solomon to survive. Still, Mr. Ford did not actually want to enslave the Blacks. But that is only way of having labor at that time, “*Under the circumstances- Under the circumstances he is a slaver!*” he said to Eliza.

The second was Mr. Turner. Mr. Epps sent many of his slaves to Mr. Turner for a while because his plantation was attacked by plague. Mr. Turner kindly once offered Solomon to play violin on his friend’s birthday. He also said that all the money for playing the violin went for him.

The last one is Mr. Bass, a Canada-origin White man. Though he had lived for a long time in the South, he did not really support nor agree on slavery. He debated with Mr. Epps “... *That there is no justice or righteous in this slavery*”. He continued by asking how if Mr. Epps in their (slave) position, “...*suppose they patched the law, taking up your liberty. Making you a slave. Suppose*”. He also continued that slavery is wrong. Human, regardless their race, is equal. “*White and Black alike*”.

C. Blacks’ reactions on slavery

Living under cruel slavery was really hard. But avoiding slavery was much harder. The writer summarized the Blacks’ reactions toward slavery into 5; fighting back, submitting themselves to the Whites, ending of their lives as embodiment of desperation, revealing their true identity, and hiding their true identity. Every reaction, however, had its own risks.

Fighting back was the first reaction. It was a normal thing when we were mistreated. But in slavery time it was not that simple. As they were weak, the Whites could do anything if the slaves obstructed them. Fighting back did not only mean to defend yourself, but also would bring you into a bigger trouble, even death. When Tibbeats tried to hurt Solomon, Solomon tried to defend himself and fought back. He could defeat Tibbeats. But later Tibbeats called his friend and hung Solomon. To avoid bigger and more problems, Mr. Ford had to divert his ownership over Solomon to Mr. Epps. The next example was when a White crew tried to sexually abused Eliza in the ship. A Black male slave tried to prevent him. His action ended his own life. He was stabbed to death. Still, some Blacks believed that they were born as slaves. They had no courage or ability to fight. So, it was useless if they asked for the other Blacks to fight, “*Three can’t stand against a whole crew. The rest here are niggers, born and bred slaves. Niggers ain’t got the stomach for a fight. Not a damn one.*”

Because fighting back risked and brought the Blacks into greater suffering and even death, many Blacks finally submitted themselves. They let the Whites do whatever they wanted to, even very disgraceful conducts. Eliza and Patsy were often abused sexually. If they resisted, they would be tortured. Those conditions forced them to let their bodies as a way of surviving. “...*I have done so many dishonorable things to survive...*” said Eliza.

The great sufferings, however, led and brought many Blacks to despair. Some of them tried to stand on the lashes just to survive. But some of them fell into despair. They preferred a death without pain to a suffering life. They were tired of being tortured physically and abused sexually. Death was a solution of their sufferings. We could see this clearly when Patsey requested Solomon to end her life, *“End my life. Take my body to the margin of the swamp. Take me by the throat. Hold me low in the water until I’m still ‘n without life. Bury me in a lonely place of dyin’.”* Solomon, however, refused this. She asked Patsey to be strong and not to fall into despair.

The next thing that the Blacks could do to avoid the slavery was revealing their true identity as Free Man. Enslaving Free Man was a serious violation of law. If a White was proven to enslave a Free Man, he could be made bankrupt in the court. Mr. Parker said to Mr. Epps as Mr. Epps tried to prevent Solomon when Mr. Epps picked him, *“As it will be my pleasure to bankrupt you in the courts”*. Unfortunately, this was not easy to acquire because when they were kidnapped, they were coerced and tortured to accept their new identities, which were run-away slaves from the South. Revealing their true identity was even harder when they were already in South America. This did not only risk the Blacks themselves, but also the good Whites who were willing to help them. Solomon told his real identity to Mr. Ford. But Mr. Ford preferred to transfer Solomon to Mr.

Epps as it might negatively influence his financial situation, *“I can’t hear that... And I have a debt to be mindful of”*. The same thing also happened when he asked for Armsby’s help. Armsby was the only White slave on Mr. Epps’s plantation. He was made slave as a punishment because he had drunk and caused some troubles. He asked Armsby to post his letter to his family. Though Armsby had promised to keep it as a secret, he later told Mr. Epps. Fortunately, somehow Solomon succeeded to make sure that Armsby told lies to Mr. Epps. If Solomon failed to make sure Mr. Epps or Mr. Epps believed Armsby, Solomon could be tortured badly.

Solomon really took a lesson from what happened after telling Mr. Ford and Armsby about his true identity. He later kept his identity in secret. When he was on the ship, he had been told not to reveal himself because it might bring him into death, *“If you want to survive, do and say as little as possible. Tell no one who really you are, and tell no one that you can write or read. Unless you want to be a dead nigger”*. Solomon, somehow, believed there would be a right person to help him. And after a long time of waiting, he met Mr. Bass. Mr. Bass view’s on slavery later encouraged Solomon to ask his help. Mr. Bass had important influence on Solomon’s return to the North.

CONCLUSION

12 Years A Slave provided the clear picture of slavery in South America. Slavery could be seen

through inhuman treatment toward the Blacks and also the legalized violence which protected the Whites. The Blacks and Whites lived peacefully in the North. On the contrary, in the South the Blacks mostly lived as slaves and the Whites as the slave masters. There are five reactions of Blacks toward racism; fighting back, submitting themselves, falling into despair and willing to die, revealing, and hiding their real identity.

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