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Preddiplomski studij mađarskog jezika i književnosti i engleskog jezika i književnosti

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The Everyday Slave Life in *12 Years a Slave*

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the life of slaves in the novel *12 Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. The first part covers the historical facts about slavery and the importance of slave narratives as the legacy of former slaves for the development of American literature. The rest of the paper depicts the reality of everyday slave life of Solomon Northup, from being a free man that was taken to slavery, the years he spent as a slave, and to his freedom at last. The life of slave women is also mentioned: the cruelty and sexul abuse. The paper concludes by demonstrating that *12 Years a Slave* has to be seen as an attempt to change the institution of slavery and the government to achieve moral justice for slaves and African American people in the United States.

Key words: slavery, Solomon Northup, the South, slave narratives, everyday life

Introduction

A great part of American history – more than 250 years – is marked and remembered by the agony of African American people. Slavery began in 1619 in Colonial America when the first African slaves were brought to Jamestown, Virginia. In that time slavery became a legal institution. At first they were indentured servants[1] but their status changed into chattel slaves in 1640. Black slaves worked mainly on the tobacco, rice and indigo plantations in the South. The invention of the cotton gin increased the need for slave labor. One third of the population in the antebellum South was slaves. Their behavior and movement were restricted and they were also prohibited from learning how to read and write. The differences among slaves also kept the order on the plantation and stopped them from organizing against their masters. Any sign of rebellious behavior was brutally punished. Many free black people and antislavery activists in the North started helping Southern slaves escape to the North, which is known as the Underground Railroad. During the 1830s, the movement for the abolition of slavery was strong and many northerners, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe, tried to abolish slavery. Later on, Abraham Lincoln, a Republican candidate later chosen for the president of the United States, issued the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War. Slavery was completely abolished in 1865 by the 13th Amendment.

Solomon Northup, the author of the book *Twelve Years a Slave,* was an African American carpenter and a father of three children. He was born free in Minerva, Essex County, New York. He was a talented violinist and dedicated family man who was kidnapped and forced into slavery. During his captivity and enslavement, Solomon wrote everything down: brutal and horrific life of slaves. This book is based upon his life and his experience during the period of slavery he was taken in. In the next chapters, I will talk about slaves and their everyday life during their captivity and enslavement.

[1] Laborers who are under a contract with their master for a period of time. In exchange, servants get food, shelter, passage across seas and accommodation.

I Slave Narratives

Slave narrative is one of the genres in American literature. It is a form of confessional writing that is either written or dictated by fugitive or former slaves. Their literary works are both fictional and autobiographical and their purpose is to preserve African American culture, their ancestors and to show others what slaves were going through every day. They depict the reality of slave life. Some of the most influential writers and representatives of slave narratives are William Wells Brown, Moses Roper, John Brown, Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, etc. The best-known writer of fictional slave narratives is Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of the first novels with antislavery features and sentiments. It influenced other slaves and abolitionist activists to fight harder and abolish the slavery completely. Autobiographical slave narratives are great in number. For example, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* written by an American slave, had an impact on the perspective of the pursuit of intellectual and physical freedom for every slave. *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* was the first slave narrative that became a best-seller internationally in 1789. There he wrote:

> The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me.…When I looked around the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little I found some black people about me. … I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair. (Olaudah 70).

This quote shows the horrific and disturbing pictures and slaves' deepest feelings and fears. Similarly, Solomon Northup's story has an autobiographical touch and depicts his life before, during and after he was captured and enslaved. A reader can feel every word he wrote: ''I can speak of slavery only so far as it came under my own observation- only so far as I have known and experienced it in my own person'' (Northup 1).

II Free Man Taken to Slavery

The most important and major character in *12 Years a Slave* is Solomon Northup himself. He was born free in 1808, a son of a former slave. His education was very good taking into consideration that he was a son of a slave. Solomon knew how to read and write and he learned how to play the violin as well. During his childhood, he worked with his father as a farmer. He married at the age of 21. They lived a normal life in Saratoga Springs, the state of New York, his wife Anne and three children Elizabeth, Margaret and Alonzo. He worked his way through life. ''Thus far the history of my life presents nothing whatever unusual - nothing but the common hopes, and loves, and labors of an obscure colored man, making his humble progress in the world''(Northup 10). He was a decent family man until that one night in 1841 when two men, Merill Brown and Abram Hamilton, approached him and asked him to work for them in circus because of his extraordinary violin playing. It sounded like a very good deal, he only had to travel with them to Washington D.C. and he would make some money but that did not come through. '' My friends, several times during the afternoon, entered drinking saloons, and called for liquor … On these occasions, after serving themselves, they would pour out a glass and hand it to me''(Northup 17). Solomon got sick not because of the drinking, he was not intoxicated, so when he was going to see a doctor he lost his consciousness and the next morning when he woke up he was alone, he was chained: ''The pain in my head had subsided in a measure, but I was very faint and weak. I was sitting upon a low bench, made of rough boards, and without coat or hat. I was hand cuffed. Around my ankles also were a pair of heavy fetters'' (Northup 19). He was deceived into something that was not real; they tricked him so they could kidnap and sell him to slave masters. Solomon was then 33-year-old man. Even though he was free, working and living in the North, he was forcefully made something that he is not: a slave.

At this stage of his life, Solomon was enslaved by the man called James H. Burch who was a slave trader in Washington D.C. Slave traders usually presented their slaves as some sort of property that was on sale. Everyone interested was allowed to look at the property and observe everything about them. Specifics about the ''products'' were there. White people could just come and say what they needed and a human being became their property. Solomon was surrounded by other slaves and he did not stick out except when he was trying to explain to them that he was a free man: ''I was a freeman-a resident of Saratoga, where I had a wife and children, who were also free, and that my name was Northup'' (Northup 23). Burch did not tolerate his behavior; every complaint was physically punished. Burch claimed that he was his slave and that he came from Georgia and would soon be transported to New Orleans, Louisiana. As they were

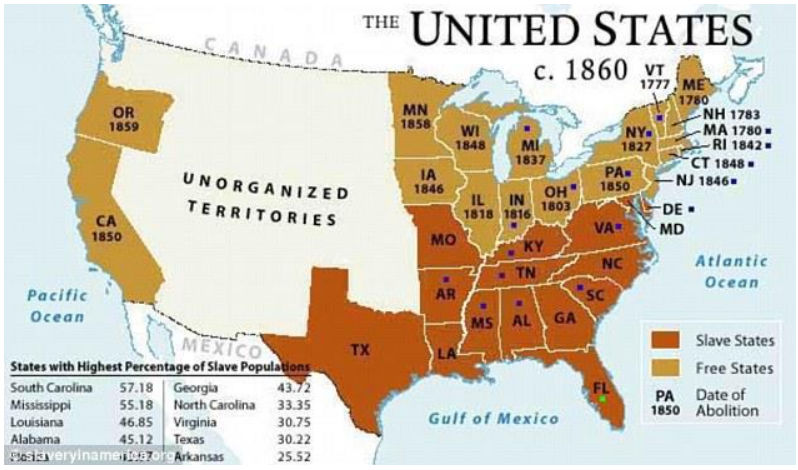
travelling on a boat down James River, Solomon had some hopes, he believed in God and his freedom:

> I thank God, who has since permitted me to escape from the thralldom of slavery, that through his merciful interposition I was prevented from imbruing my hands in the blood of his creatures … Until they have been chained and beaten-until they find themselves in the situation I was, borne away from home and family towards a land of bondage - let them refrain from saying what they would not do for liberty. (Northup 46)

Religion played a great role in African American lives. At first their religion was not specific: ‘’the religion of early Africans can most accurately be described as ancestor worship’’ (Franklin and Moss 20) but eventually they accepted Christianity: ‘’It was a strange religion, this Christianity, which taught equality and brotherhood and at the same time introduced on a large scale the practice of tearing people from their homes and transporting them to a distant land to become slaves’’ (Franklin and Moss 22). Along with other slaves, Solomon ended up in hands of Burch’s associate Theophilus Freeman; we can see the irony of his last name: he took their freedom. Theophilus Freeman changed his name into Platt which makes him an alien, a man without any connection to his past life. He lost his identity and his legacy as slave traders’ only interest was to sell slaves and to make good profit: ’’Traders faced a range of fixed costs in the purchasing, transporting, and sale of slaves that encouraged them to deal in high-value workers’’ (Buchanan 100). At first, Solomon seemed like a profitable asset but he got smallpox and that nearly killed him, which of course only made him suffer longer in those terrible life conditions. Luckily, he got better and he and a woman slave Eliza were sold to the slave master William Ford. That is the breaking point where he becomes a real slave, the person that is called Platt, without any legacy, past and family. The real agony and torture begin now.

III The Slave Life in the Antebellum South

The institution of slavery reached its peak in a period up to the Civil War: the period known as the antebellum South.



Picture 1: Geographical map of the slave states in the South

Rich white people in possession of plantations were in need of cheap labor and the best solution for them was to buy slaves and make them work all day long without proper accommodations. Slavery grew in the South and it became more and wide-spread:

> Some plantations of the Upper South continued to flourish using slaves. Corn, tobacco, wheat, and livestock often grew on the same plantation, making it possible for planters to turn a profit. In addition, nearly every industry used slave labor for at least some of its work. (DeFord 81)

A great number of southerners owned slaves and called themselves slave master. Most of slave masters were cruel and heartless. As already mentioned, Solomon and Eliza got sold to the slave master. This slave master was one of those who were nice and kind, of course, he has to be as he was a Baptist preacher: ‘’Nevertheless, he was a model master, walking uprightly, according to the light of his understanding, and fortunate was the slave who came to his possession’’ (Northup 66). There is a question that keeps appearing in Solomon’s head and that is how this good man can be a slave holder? They are treated kindly by his family and other slaves at his new home: the plantation ‘’Great Pine Woods’’ in the heart of Louisiana. Their days were good, Eliza got to work in the house and Solomon worked at Ford’s lumber mill. Sundays were reserved for the prayers where he taught them about the Bible and morality. This was in the summer of 1841; the summer when Solomon invented a new way of transporting lumber via

waterway, which saved Ford a lot of money. Solomon earned himself a reputation of the "smartest nigger in the Pine Woods," which made him work with one of the short-tempered white people named John M. Tibeats. After a few financial problems and strings of bad luck Ford was forced to sell Platt to Tibeats. This happened in the winter of 1842. ''At the time of my sale to Tibeats, the price agreed to be given for me being more than the debt, Ford took a chattel mortgage of four hundred dollars. I am indebted for my life, as will hereafter be seen, to that mortgage'' (Northup 76). His new home, Bayou Boeuf, was just twenty-seven miles from his former home. His new master Tibeats was a complete opposite to Mister Ford; he was a cruel, bitter, never satisfied and brutal slave master. They did not like each other very much, so he tried to whip him but his attempt was not successful because Solomon was stronger than him. He left the plantation in rage and promised to take revenge. At this plantation he had to work very hard from dusk till dawn. From the very moment he returned, his revenge was on:

> Thereupon Tibeats tied my wrists, drawing the rope around them with his utmost strength. Then he bound my ankles in the same manner. In the meantime the other two had slipped a cord within my elbows, running it across my back, and tying it firmly. It was utterly impossible to move hand or foot with a remaining piece of rope Tibeats made an awkward noose, and placed it about my neck. (Northup 82)

This quote is just one of the examples of the cruelty and violence slaves suffered every day. Solomon was left immobile in the yard throughout the night and day. Some of the other slaves came to give him some water because of the sun and the warmth of the day. The feeling of helplessness and hopelessness got into him, yet he was saved by Ford's arrival: ''Thank God, Master Ford that you have come at last'' (Northup 86). He freed him from this agony. His debt kept him safe. Tibeats knew that if he killed him, he would lose this "property." In this example Solomon is trying to show how in the South slaves did not have the basic civil rights as Audrey Smedley asserts here:

> A third and final point is that levels of brutality and harshness are not necessarily indications of whether slaves are considered human. The acceptance of the slave as another human being did not inexorably lead to amelioration of the slave condition or even diminish the levels of brutality sustained in any given society. (117)

Slave masters were allowed to kill slaves and they would not get punished. The body of a slave would just be dumped somewhere and they would move on with their business. In Solomon's case, the cruelty goes on. Tibeats attacked him with a hatchet and Solomon, acting in self-

defense, almost choked him to death. After he let go of him, Solomon became a fugitive slave. These few hours of his life were tense, full of adrenalin and fear. He had to run for his life even though his path was full of danger and death, not to mention the dogs Tibeats sent after him. Throughout the history many slaves tried to escape, some of them succeeded while others did not:

> The ubiquitous runaway defied all the odds. Sometimes he stayed away until his anger or that of his master subsided. Cold and hungry, he frequently returned after a few days, took his flogging, and went back to work. On other occasion, however, the runaway eluded his pursuers for weeks, months, or even years, safe in his bailiwick near the plantation. (Blassingame 196)

Being in a great danger, Solomon looks for only one person who has been always nice to him and treated him as a human being: Master Ford. Master Ford, kind as always, saves him again. He gives him shelter. Even though he is now safe, he realizes that his freedom is only temporary. After spending four days at Ford's estate where he has been treated nicely and kindly, he has to return to his real master Tibeats. This time Ford is able to make Tibeats not to punish him for his running away. We can see the constant battle between Tibeats and Solomon; their relationship is based upon constant antagonism so it is in a way better that Solomon is sold to another master Edwin Epps.

The new chapter of a real torture is beginning, this one being even worse than the others. The new master as Solomon says, ''is a large, portly, heavy- bodied man with light hair, high cheek bones, and a Roman nose of extraordinary dimensions'' (Northup 115). At the time Solomon comes into his possession, he is a drunken sadist who likes to torture his slaves just for his own pleasure. Solomon is now working on Epps' cotton plantation. His shifts are long lasting and never ending. Chapter XII is a full description of the slave labor on plantations. This chapter is very detailed and gives us the real picture of how it really was in the antebellum South in the days of slavery. The real history is thus recorded here. Another good example of Epps' cruelty is his nickname ''nigger breaker'' and the fact that almost every day one of the slaves has been whipped for some silly reasons like falling short of their cotton quotes, quarreling with their roommates, and even if they danced too slowly for his entertainment. Solomon, however, stands out because he is a northerner and was more special than other slaves in the South. His knowledge and education make him different. For example, he is ordered to make the curved axe handle and to play the violin because no other slave knew how to do that. With the plantation

facing economic problems, Solomon is sent to the sugar plantation to make some money for his master. There he becomes an overseer because of his natural ability of harvesting sugar cane. In a way, he has climbed up the social ladder. He is even allowed to play the violin on some important occasions and that is a unique chance for him to make some of his own money and after that the most important thing happens: Solomon starts writing. He is granted a new position: ''I was the wealthiest 'nigger' on Bayou Boeuf'' (Northup 137). Even though Solomon has made some sort of good life as a slave, he still wants his freedom and asks a ship captain to smuggle him back to the North but the captain is afraid and refuses his offer. The constant struggle and fight for freedom is thus ever-present in his story. It is always present in the life of slaves. Even though enslaved and oppressed, Solomon is innovative as well: he makes a fish trap so that he and his fellow slaves can enjoy the free and fresh meat. As his life of a slave continues, Solomon has had 100 slaves under his command over the next three years. With Christmas coming, he also describes how slaves celebrate Christmas. Any slave, in this particular case slaves on the Epps' plantation, is granted three days off in the whole year and that is during Christmas time. The joy and happiness are present in their lives in these days of year. There are dancing, flirting and, of course, an abundance of food and meals that slaves are not used to:

> The table is spread in the open air, and loaded with varieties of meat and piles of vegetables. Bacon and corn meal at such times are dispensed with… They are furnished also with flour, of which biscuits are made, and often with peach and other preservers, with tarts, and every manner and description of pies, except the mince, that being an article of pastry as yet unknown among them. (Northup 150)

Yet, enjoyment and happiness only last for those three days in the whole year. The harsh reality comes back in a split second and they forget about the happy and good times. Solomon thus states: ''Such is southern life as it is, three days in the year, as I found it- the other three hundred and sixty-two being days of weariness, and fear, and suffering, and unremitting labor'' (Northup 153). Solomon also mentions another sad and disturbing thing: slaves have to sing humiliating songs about themselves: ''Ebo Dick and Jurdan's Jo, them two niggers stole my yo'' (Northup 153). As harsh as it may sound, this is their reality. In a way, they get used to it and it kind of becomes who they are.

Solomon is now a driver on the fields. Drivers and overseers have equal share of work even though drivers are under overseers. One of their jobs is to drag slaves when they faint on

the field to gain consciousness and get back to work. Solomon has to whip his gang of slaves and if they fail to use whips they are whipped themselves. Again, they have to do something that they are ordered to or they would be equally punished. He has to stay strong and do what he is made to: "I dared not show any lenity, not having the Christian fortitude of a certain well-known Uncle Tom sufficiently to brave his wrath, by refusing to perform the office" (Northup 156). The slightest clue or hope of running and escaping keeps him going. After employing Armsby, a poor white guy, to do some cheap labor on the plantation, Solomon sees an opportunity to send a letter to his loved ones. At first, Armsby agrees to send the letter but then he betrays Solomon and tells everything to master Epps who gets suspicious of him. His trust in Solomon is a bit shaken but after a while he is able to convince him that Armsby is a liar. His morality is changed, he lied to protect himself. In a desperate situation every human being will protect their own head and life. The fear of being caught is present again. Solomon is afraid of what they would do to him if they find out about his writing and his runaway attempts. His greatest fear, however, is of not being rescued:

> Hopes sprang up in my heart only to be crushed and blighted. The summer of my life was passing away; I felt I was growing prematurely old; that a few years more, and toil, and grief, and this poisonous miasmas of the swamps would accomplish their work upon me- would consign me to the grave's embrace, to moulder and be forgotten. The hope of rescue was the only light that cast a ray of comfort on my heart. (Northup 163)

To further illustrate his fears, Solomon tells the story of his fellow slave Wiley who once sneaked out in the middle of the night to visit someone on the other plantation. Wiley was caught by the roving gang of white patrollers who whipped him severely and returned him back to master Epps' plantation where he was awfully punished. Wiley ran away again, but returned again with a note from Mistress Epps' uncle to spare him the punishment. He barely survived. So after all this happening around you, you have to ask yourself whether it is worth to run away when you end up again in the hands of your masters who are now even more cruel or to stay and obey for the rest of your life?

Solomon has already been ten years under Epps' command and with every year he becomes more and more brutal. When Mr. O' Niel comes with an offer to buy Solomon, which makes him happy because he would finally move on and go away from Epps, that never happens because Mistress Epps overheard him talking how he would be glad to leave and she tells everything to master Epps who gets enraged and refuses to sell him. Later he is whipped and

punished because he dared to dream of another master. No mercy is shown to slaves. Their life is meaningless to the masters. It does not matter what they want or need, they take what they are given. It never occurs to masters that they have wishes, dreams and hopes just like other people. Maybe that is because they have been raised thinking about black people as their property, not real people. This is exemplified by Epps' oldest son who is about 12 years old:

> He looked upon the black man simply as an animal; differing in no respect from any other animal, save in the gift of speech and the possession of somewhat higher instincts, and therefore, the more valuable. To work like his father's mules- to be whipped and kicked and scourged through life- to address the white man with hat in hand, and eyes bent servilely on the earth, in his mind, was the natural and proper destiny of the slave. (Northup 182)

The children of the slave masters are brain-washed from the early age. These children are their own fathers' legacy and they keep on torturing the slaves as it is the most normal thing to do in life. The time passes and the reader is in the year of 1852; Epps has employed some carpenters to build a house on his property. Solomon is assigned to help a white man Bass who is from Canada and most importantly an abolitionist in his heart: "And what difference is there in the color of the soul? Pshaw! The whole system is as absurd as it is cruel" (Northup 187). Bass acts as a diplomat; he argues with Epps about the evil of slavery but avoids offending him. He represents the only hope for Solomon, the last call and chance for freedom. Solomon gains some strength and bravery and asks Bass for help. To prove his generosity, and in the name of justice, Bass sends letters secretly on Solomon's behalf to his friends in New York. As summer is passing away, Solomon almost loses his hope but Bass encourages him to keep on waiting and that everything is going to be all right. When the work is done, Bass leaves but promises that he will return and that they two, together, will keep on working on the slavery problem. He will help him pursue his freedom. His return brings bad news, no one responded but he does not give up, now he is even more determined to help him become a free man again. This time he promises to travel to Saratoga Springs and contact his friends personally. The time passes: work, Christmas, more work on the field. On one Sunday he is whipped because he overslept and that brings him down even more. The pain from the whipping and the pain of no response from his friends are eating him alive. He sees no hope and feels helpless in his sorrow and pain. For him, after that whipping and agony that he has gone through, no hope of salvation and happiness is possible. He thinks that his friends and family have forgotten all about him and moved on with their lives. Many dark thoughts have gone through his mind. He thinks that this is his life now and there is

no other way for him to live his life without this. However, the very next Monday morning, January 3, 1853 “Looking up, we saw two men approaching us through the cotton-field” (Northup 200).

IV The Life of Slave Women

Slave masters refused to look at their slaves as women or men, ladies or gentlemen. Women were even more targeted because of their ability to have children and be mothers. Their children were usually taken away from them and they were forced to raise the children of their masters. Young women were used to work as servants or sometimes labor hard at the fields. Many slave women were abused sexually by their masters and mainly white people who, on the one hand, hated African American people but on the other considered black slave women rape objects, which caused jealousy from their wives: ‘’Implicitly, it also evoked the threat of black sexuality to white women - a fascinating reversal since the man interracial sexual threat was that of white predators against black women’’ (Brown, Goodread and Rabe 168). In every way, black slave women were oppressed.

Throughout the story several women characters appear but the most significant one is Patsey. Patsey is one of the slaves on Epps’ plantation. She is introduced as “the most remarkable cotton picker on Bayou Boeuf” (Northup 122). At first, she seems as the most significant worker on the plantation but that is not her purpose, she is the most abused of all the slaves on the plantation. Solomon calls Patsey ‘’the queen of the field’’ (Northup 132) because she is very strong and in a good shape and condition. Working at fields is not a problem; the main problem is master Epps who is attracted to her so she suffers the most: ‘’Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress’’ (Northup 133). Patsey is a double victim: not only a slave but also a target of her mistress’ rage who hates her because Epps sexually abuses her. She never has any peace. The life torments her in every way because that was the fate of many slave women in the South. One of the examples is the situation in chapter XIV when Solomon finds Patsey confronted by master Epps and his mistress who is not such an evil woman but she wants Patsey to leave because she does not like her in presence of her husband. The idea of Patsey leaving is not something that master Epps wants to indulge his wife, so he whips Patsey to calm her down. She is punished for nothing; no good reason is there, no purpose. Slaves were mainly punished for no reason but this kind of brutality and cruelty is senseless. Another example in the novel is when Patsey is sent on another plantation to pick some soap and when she returns Epps is so furious that he accuses her of having an affair with the owner of the plantation she went to. She is again brutally punished, this time she is naked and tied to a tree. Epps does not have the

dignity to whip her himself so he forces Solomon to whip her brutally in front of everyone. His mistress is also present and looking at it with pride in her eyes:

> Mistress Epps stood on the piazza among her children, gazing on the scene with an air of heartless satisfaction. The slaves were huddled together at a little distance, their countenances indicating the sorrow of their hearts. Poor Patsey prayed piteously for mercy, but prayers were vain. Epps ground his teeth, and stamped upon the ground, screaming at me, like a mad fiend, to strike harder. (Northup 178)

Yet, his fury never stops. He abuses her for the rest of her life. There is no meaning in her life. Some slave women were married but their marriages were not legal because slaves were not allowed to marry. Many restrictions were there for women, even more than for men. Ones who worked in the fields were treated as men while others were just sexual objects for their masters. This was every slave woman's tragic destiny.

V Slaves and Freedom

The last two chapters of the book are about freeing Solomon from slavery. He explains that the letter sent on August 15, 1852 was delivered to Saratoga Springs in September to his wife Anne who shares it immediately with Henry B. Northup who is a lawyer and a former owner of Solomon's father. It was not an easy case, first they have to prove that Solomon is a free man, they could not just come and take him back: ''It was necessary to establish two facts to the satisfaction of the Governor: first, that I was a free citizen of New York; and secondly that I was wrongfully held in bondage'' (Northup 201). When they manage to prove these two facts, they head on a rescue mission. Upon their arrival, Solomon, now called Platt, is also interrogated: ''your name is Platt, is it? He asked, 'yes, master,' I responded. Pointing towards Northup, standing a few rods distant, he demanded - 'do you know that man?''' (Northup 208). The irony of this is that when he was taken into slavery, the government did not even dare to ask for his real identity and now when he wants to prove that he is a free man the investigation is on. The corruption and immorality are shown here. By seeing Henry, every single memory in Solomon's head is brought back: his wife, children, his former life, everything and he yells: '' Henry B. Northup! Thank God- thank God!'' (Northup 209). Finally, his pursuit of freedom has come true. On January 4, 1853 Solomon is released from bondage. On the way back to New York, they stop at New Orleans to verify that he is a free black man. Their next stop is Washington D.C. where his agony as a slave started. Solomon tries to prosecute Burch but he had to give it up because Burch as a white man was allowed to testify and Solomon as a black man was not. At last, Solomon is with his family again and meets his grandson for the first time. Even though he has lost twelve years of his life, he is back again and everything will be as it used to be. The institution of slavery, corrupted and morally wrong, cannot be changed: ''my narrative is at end. I have no comments to make upon the subject of Slavery. Those who read this book may form their own opinion of the 'peculiar institution''' (Northup 221). His history is written.

Conclusion

The novel *12 Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup is a slave narrative in which a free black man from the North tells the story of his enslavement: how he is kidnapped, turned into a slave, and sold into the slave-holding South. From this new perspective, he tries to show what was really going on with slaves and how their lives were organized. His personal memoires are the proof and written history of the agony and tormenting that slaves had to go through. Slave masters, cruel as they mostly were, did not care about slaves; they just cared about the amount of work they had to make. Solomon tried to change the constitution in the United States but at that time he did not succeed because the government turned a blind eye to his problem. Even though just one of the many enslaved black people, Solomon had an opportunity to write about slavery and show people, both white and black in the North and the South, the difficulties and suffering of black people on Southern plantations. Other enslaved black people were not so lucky to record their stories as many ended their lives nameless, forgotten, abused to death. Just the fact that their dead bodies were dumped and no record of them living existed is terrifying because that could be someone's grandmother or grandfather. Even today the legacy of the institution of slavery is present in the United States through open and subtle racism. It lives through different kinds of social and cultural stereotypes, attitudes and way of thinking and behaving. Yet, slave narratives like Solomon Northup's remind us not to forget that the fight for freedom, human rights and prejudice-free world is worth every risk including one's life if necessary.

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