
**From Plantation Romance to Slave Testimony: A Comparative Analysis of
Gone With the Wind and *Twelve Years A Slave***

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Abstract

This paper analyses the contrasting depiction of slavery in two prominent narratives from the Old South of the United States of America. Margrett Mitchell's popular novel *Gone With the Wind* presents a romanticised version of plantation life in the Old South whereas Solomon Northop's autobiographical work *Twelve Years a Slave* highlights the lived experience of African Americans bought and sold as slaves. Solomon Northop's account problematises the myths perpetuated through Margrett Mitchell's novel, by weighing upon the brutalities of the slave experience. This paper adds to the discussion on literary representation of racial differences, historical representation and how narratives provide diverging accounts of the same factual occurrences.

Keywords: slavery, popular fiction, narrative, American Literature, testimony, history.

Introduction:

Popular fiction has been an important form of literature in almost every language. *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell is the perfect example of popular literature and its impact on readers is still relevant. It remains the second highest selling book of all times, after the Bible, in United States of America according to a 2014 Harris poll. Its popularity is such that, just three years after its publication in 1936, a movie based on the novel was released in 1939, which remains the highest earning Hollywood movie of all times. The novel has sold more than 30 million copies around the world. It also won the Pulitzer Prize in 1937, one year after its publication. The novel tells the story of Scarlett O'Hara, a Southern girl who is ready to do whatever it takes to survive in the Civil War and Reconstruction period in the Old South.

The story of the novel is based in the Clayton County and Atlanta, both of which are part of the Southern state of Georgia. Southern states of the United States of America are infamously known for their advocacy of slavery and racial prejudice towards non-white Americans. Margret Mitchell has tried to appease the sentiments of the Old South through her book. The novel has often been criticised for its overwhelming ideal representation of

the

old South lifestyle. Decorated gowns and dresses, well organised routine and such things of the Old South are brought in the foreground by Mitchell. But Mitchell leaves slavery out of the main story and keeps it in the backdrop, "what is despicable, what is lamentable is to have hit the popular fancy and not have done anything to change it, but everything to fix it; to flatter it with false dreams of splendor in the past, when life was mainly as simple and sad colored as it is now..." (Howell; 1900)

The whole narrative of the novel takes place in the Old South during and after the Civil War of 1861-1865, with some incidents of Scarlett's parents life described in flashback. During this time, slave owning was an important part of the Old south life, yet the novel places no emphasis either on slavery or slave's experience during that time period. The white southerners used these slaves for almost all of their requirements. Slaves worked on farms, in the kitchen, looked after the houses etc. The southerners never ever worked on their own. Slavery became a profitable business. Generations of southerners were raised on the principle of white supremacy. Southerners defended their argument in favour of slavery by saying that all men were not born equal and the non-whites were inferior to them, so they had the right to keep them as their slaves. The only mention of slavery is there to justify it. Slaves are illustrated as being content and comfortable with the idea of them being literally owned by another human beings. Slave life is at ease and they face no hardship in the novel.

Social purpose is in control when Negroes come home from their field work and the whites hear "the shrill careless laughter of Negro voices" (8). There is no mention of sweat, of exhaustion, of the arduousness of field work. *Gone with the Wind* is a world without sweat, except for that caused by the Yankees." (Watkins 1970)

There is surely a sense of racism and prejudice in Margret Mitchell's portrayal of the African American slaves and mulattos (person with a black and a white parent). All the characters of "*Gone with the Wind*" show a form of racism at one point or another. The white southerners take pride in their ownership of slaves. Slaves are shown to be intellectually inferior to whites and the novel argues that they cannot survive with their own intellect and therefore need a master.

The only slave character that somewhat standouts is that of Mammy, the household slave of the O'Hara family who looked after Scarlett and her sisters. She may not be a main character in the story but she does play an important role in the progression of the story. She is the only one who understands Scarlett's nature and does not refrain from rebuking her, whenever necessary. Mammy is the only black character who stays around till the end of the story. There is no mention of her real name, Mammy is the name given to her when she was gifted to Ellen O'Hara (Scarlett's mother) as a slave girl. She served as the nurse and caretaker of the O'Hara children and thus develops a faux maternal relationship with them, which allows her a sense of authority over them. The name 'Mammy' itself seems to be taken from the word 'mommy' (mother). Scarlett and her sisters consider Mammy as their second mother. She is arguably the boldest black character in the novel, going as far as to order

around the family, more frequently to Scarlett. As the author writes about her, “It had always been a struggle to teach Scarlett that most of her natural impulses were unladylike. Mammy’s victories over Scarlett were hard-won and represented guile unknown to the white mind.” (Mitchell 2012)

Despite all her boldness, she is still the property of the O’Hara’s. Mitchell implies that Mammy can boss the family around and get away with it, even though she is considered to be an object. Mitchell also implies, in a racist manner, that African-American women have a kind of “guile” that allows them to manipulate those under their care. Adding to this racism, Mitchell further suggests that Mammy doesn’t find anything wrong with being owned by another human being. In fact, Mammy’s character is herself depicted to be pro-slavery and can never think of betraying and leaving the O’Hara family. She stays with the now devastated O’Hara’s after the North’s attack on their plantation and house (named Tara), even when she could get her freedom and live a life on her own. Through Mammy, Mitchell tries to show that slaves were happy to be owned by their masters and the North’s disapproval of slavery was baseless.

Mitchell not only creates her black character with a certain prejudice and assigns them specific personality traits, she also uses language to show blacks as inferior to whites. The dialogues of all the black characters are written in a certain way to suggest their illiteracy. All their dialogues are filled with grammatical errors. The language written gives a sense of certain accent being used by the slaves. There are many examples like when Big Sam, the foreman at O’Hara’s reiterates his meeting with the Northern whites, "An' dey ast me ter set down wid dem, lak Ah wuz jes' as good as dey wuz" (Mitchell 2012) The speech is deliberately misspelled in order to show inferiority and lack of proper education. Also, almost all the white characters use derogatory terms like “darkies”, “niggers” etc. for their slaves. Thus, the author does not try to hide the bigotry, rather glorifies it by means of language.

Even the seemingly noble and gentle characters like Ashley Wilkes and Melanie, carry a racial prejudice towards slaves. Ashley has a talk with Scarlett regarding the work force for the newly set up timber factory. When Ashley objects to Scarlett’s use of forced labour, Scarlett confronts him by saying that he too had slaves. To this Ashley replies, “They weren’t miserable. And besides, I’d have freed them all when Father died if the war hadn’t already freed them.” (Mitchell; 2012) Ashley’s logic that their slaves were not miserable resonates with the South’s ideology that slaves didn’t mind being owned by their masters. This is absurd keeping in mind that when someone owns another human, one cannot expect complete goodwill on the part of the owner, because if it had been so, they would not have owned the person in the first place. Melanie too has a racist view when she disagrees with Ashley on the idea of moving to the North after the end of the Civil War as she could not bear sending her children to study along with the children of freed slaves.

The most daring and unflinching way used by the author to justify the ideas of pro-slavery and white supremacy is by glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, a racist organisation that still exists today and is responsible for various crimes against the African-American people in the United States of America. The novel sees the Klan as a noble organisation set out to uphold the values of the Old South. The male characters of the novel, Frank, Ashley and even Rhett Butler, are the proud members of this organisation. They actively take part in the Klan's activities and Rhett Butler even goes to jail for killing an African American for the Klan. The Klan is represented as a vigilante organisation which punishes criminals, who happen to be freed slaves almost every time. The male characters go on a revenge mission to avenge the apparent rape of Scarlett by an African American, ironically Scarlett is saved from the same by Big Sam, one of the slaves at Tara who was now a free man. During the mission Ashley and Frank die. Thus the author again portrays African American as villains responsible for deaths of the male characters, upholding to the novel's racism. The actions of the Klan are justified for maintaining order in the South's society.

The novel is a regretful looking back at the ideal society of the Old South which was ruined after South's loss in the Civil War. It is not hard to believe that the characters in the novel see the North as the real wrongdoer responsible for their ruin. Northern citizens are looked down upon. The Northern are depicted as uncivilised, savage and lacking the mannerisms that the Southern have. The North's freeing of slaves is rejected by the author. She characterizes freed slaves as childlike, easily led and from long habit accustomed to taking orders. She describes them as running wild, "like monkeys or small children turned loose among treasured objects whose value is beyond their comprehension." According to Mitchell, "Slaves were neither miserable nor unfortunate. The negroes were far better off under slavery than they were now under freedom, and if she didn't believe it, just look about her!" (Mitchell; 2012) On the criticism of the emancipation of the slaves as depicted in the novel, Floyd C. Watkins writes "The freed slave here is just another mean nigger who causes an uprising by the Ku Klux Klan, punishment of Southern whites by the Yankees, and the death of another of Scarlett's husbands." (Watkins; 1970)

Thus, the Southerners despise the North for freeing the slaves and taking away from them their society. Northern characters are corrupt, unfaithful. Northern soldiers are shown looting the houses of the defeated Southern people. One such soldier tries to steal from the O'Hara's house and is courageously killed by Scarlett. The novel takes pride in insulting and criticising the North. After the war, during the Reconstruction era, South is shown to suffer at the hands of the North. There is poverty all around and the main characters including Scarlett, struggle to maintain themselves. The author therefore paints a picture of the South as the victim of North's oppression. The racism in the novel further shows up when during this reconstruction period, the Southern whites disapprove of the freed slave's right to vote and be a part of the government.

There is a completely different perspective of slavery that is in opposition to the one depicted in "Gone with the Wind", which emerged during the 19th century in which the novel

is based. This abolitionist view of slavery stresses upon the hardships faces by the slaves at the hands of their masters. Many stories and novels have been written during 19th century to emphasis on the slave's view of life. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852 is an abolitionist novel that narrates the story of a fictional slave 'Uncle Tom' and the struggles he had to go through because of being enslaved. This novel proved to be a best seller and was ranked 2nd to The Bible in terms of sales in the 19th century. The novel shows the ugly face of slavery and the cruelty of slave owners. This novel is believed to have powered the abolitionist cause in the United States of America.

Apart from fictional stories, there were also various memoirs written by freed slaves, in which the freed slaves themselves narrated actual events that happened in their lives as slaves. The book *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup is a good example of such memoirs. Published in 1853, the slave narrative is the tale of Solomon Northup, a free man in New York, living as a farmer and musician, who is deceived, kidnapped and sold as a slave in the South. Solomon describes his struggles as a slave. He describes his life as field slave at two households. Northup's first owner was William Prince Ford, who ran a lumber mill on a bayou of the Red River of South. Northup subsequently had several other owners, less humane than Ford, during his twelve-year under slavery. At times, his carpentry and other skills contributed to his being treated relatively well; but he also suffered extreme cruelty. On two occasions, he was attacked by John Tibeats, a white man he was leased to, and when he tried to defend himself, he suffered severe retaliations. After about two years of enslavement, Northup was sold to Edwin Epps, a notoriously cruel cotton planter. Epps held Northup enslaved for 10 years, during which time he assigned him to various roles from cotton picker, to hauler to driver, which required Northup to oversee the work of fellow slaves and punish them for undesirable behaviour. While on Epps' plantation, Northup became friends with a slave girl named Patsey, about whom he writes in the book. Epps's wife Mary became jealous when Epps started raping Patsey, who would have been under the age of 18 when he began assaulting her. Mary demanded her husband sell Patsey but he refused so, as detailed by Northup in the book, Mary began abusing Patsey physically as well. In his book, Northup wrote that Mary tried to bribe other workers and slaves to kill Patsey and dump her body in the swamps, but no one would. Even though Patsey was a highly productive slave and a favorite of Epps, she was not given special treatment. Though Northup described Patsey as "a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl," the intense brutality she suffered, caught between "a licentious master and a jealous mistress" drove her wish for death. Yet Patsey, like Northup, also dreamed fervently of freedom.

While at Epps' plantation, Northup meets Samuel Bass, a white Canadian carpenter. Solomon tells him about his kidnapping and Bass helps him to attain freedom by sending letters to Solomon's friends and family in New York. Eventually with the help of New York attorney Henry B. Northup, Solomon is able to attain his freedom due to a law passed in 1840 by the state of New York, providing help to rescue its citizens abducted into slavery. Thus in 1853, after suffering for 12 years, Solomon is reunited with his family and is a free

man again. Solomon Northup's memoir is considered outstanding for its detailing of the hard lives of slaves.

When seen in comparison to *Gone with the Wind*, clearly the contrast is visible. While "Gone with the Wind" argues that slaves were happy to work for their master, Solomon's memoir shows that not only were the slaves treated inhumanely in the first place, slaves were also forcefully abducted into slavery. While Mitchell portrays North as immoral and villainous, Northup's story shows South to be evil and the North and its people as humane, valuing human life. Mitchell's slave owners are benevolent and generous to the slave but this is not the same case for Northup. He is beaten badly by his master and is forced to inflict violence on his fellow slaves.

There are other memoirs from freed slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Ann Jacobs, and William Wells Brown. However, Northup was unique in documenting his being kidnapped as a free man from the North and sold into slavery. His perspective was always to compare what he saw to what he knew before while living as a free man in a free state. While there were hundreds of such kidnappings, he was among the few persons who gained freedom again. Moreover, early and mid-twentieth century historians of slavery, Kenneth Stampp, Stanley Elkins, and Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, endorsed the historical accuracy of the book. Eakin and Logsdon in 1968, wrote:

In the last analysis, [the] narrative deserves to be believed, not simply because [Northup] seems to be talking reasonably, not merely because he adorns his tale with compelling and persuasive details. At every point where materials exist for checking his account, it can be verified. (Eakin & Logsdon; 1968)

These materials include trial records, correspondence, diary, and slave sale records. There are no such records to verify the arguments in "Gone with the Wind". In fact, Floyd C. Watkins has pointed out many historical inaccuracies in "Gone with the Wind" in his research article "Gone with the Wind as Vulgar Literature".

It is certainly clear that "Gone with the Wind" gives no space to slave's experience. It is only about the Southern white families and engages itself with their daily life, with slaves only as secondary characters. "Gone with the Wind" treats slaves exactly like the southerners thought of them- second class citizens. The African Americans are never treated as main characters, they are never emphasised upon in the whole narrative. They are overshadowed by the idealistic white men and women. Slaves are depicted as being happy to work under their southern master. They are happy go lucky, cheerful people, always ready to obey their white owners. Unlike many abolitionist writings depicting the hardship faced by slaves, "Gone with the Wind" totally forgoes their narrative. William Faulkner has beautifully written, "Only thank God men have done learned how to forget quick what they ain't brave enough to cure." (Faulkner; 2011).

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