



A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN *UP FROM SLAVERY*

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ABSTRACT

*The present article aims at exploring and analyzing the representation of women in Booker T. Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery* published in 1901. The memoir is a moving account of the life of Booker T. Washington from the early childhood up to his premier achievements in life. His trajectory of life takes the readers to discover many facets of his life including the representation of women. He mainly devoted his life for the uplift of the Negro people who were the victims of the apartheid in the United States of America. He worked with the missionary zeal to support the black people in raising their standard of living during the aftermath of slavery in America. The emphasis on education was his first priority as he thought that it would diminish the gulf between the whites and the Negro people in America. Some women came in his life and played a key role in shaping his personality and character. The present article critically examines the representation of women in *Up from Slavery* and sheds light on the role of women in Washington's narrative.*

Key words:

Autobiography, slavery, trajectory, apartheid, representation of women, Negro, America, victims, African American women



INTRODUCTION

For nearly two hundred years African Americans (The Negro Slaves) endured racial discrimination, segregation and organized oppression in various forms at the hands of the white race. T Booker T. Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery* is a record of his struggle against the oppressive system of the whites. The historical significance of his autobiography lies primarily in the portrayal of African American experience during the slavery and post slavery period. The book offers insights into the challenges faced by the African Americans after the Emancipation Proclamation (1 January 1863) and their efforts to accomplish educational, social and economic progress. The autobiography of Washington documents his trajectory from enslavement to becoming a great educator and leader of his black community.

The main objective of the present paper is to critically analyze the representation of women in Booker T. Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery*. By way of analyzing the plight of women in the narrative of Washington one gets a clear picture of the roles played by women in the life of the author and how they contributed to the overall progress of the African American Society.

The methodology employed for the present article is analytical.

Booker T. Washington's Early Life and Writing Career

Booker T. Washington, one of the powerful African-American writers and dominant educationists, was born on April 5, 1856 into a mixed family on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. His mother was a Negro slave and his father was a white plantation owner. It was a period when the human rights of African- American citizens were at stake.. As a child, he had to face innumerable difficulties because his family had to move to Malden, West Virginia after the Emancipation Proclamation (end of slavery). He could not attend regular classes as he was compelled to work to support his family financially. In the beginning, he worked in a salt furnace and later in a coal mine. He enrolled himself at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia in 1872. After graduation, Booker returned to Malden in 1875. There, he began to teach the black children in a day-school and black adults at night. His way of teaching and his philosophical outlook led him to become the head of the newly established normal school for African-Americans at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. There, he worked with a missionary zeal and brought the institute in limelight.

Later, Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute had more than 100 well-equipped buildings, 1055 students, 200 teaching faculty, 38 trades and vocational subjects. Booker T. Washington was of the opinion that the best interests of the black people in the post-reconstruction era



could be realized through education in the crafts and industrial skills. Cultivation of virtues such as empathy brotherhood, honesty and compassion, he thought, was necessary for the overall progress of his community in all the spheres of life. According to him, economic security was more advantageous than the political and social benefits. Booker believed in shared responsibility. Atlanta Compromise was a landmark in the history of America which was famous for the combined efforts of the black and the white people.

Booker T. Washington was granted an honorary master's degree from Harvard University in 1896. He was also a recipient of the honorary doctorate degree from Dartmouth College, New Hampshire. He not only became famous for his contribution to the fields of education and policymaking, but he also became the celebrated author of well-known books such as *The Future of America* (1899), *Up From Slavery* (1901), *Character Building* (1902), *Working with Hands* (1904), *Tuskegee and its People* (1905), *The Negro in the South* (1907) etc. and carved his name on the map of American literature. Therefore, Booker T. Washington became a role model for the African-American people. His books are based on his personal experiences and community life. His deep thinking and commitment to his people was praiseworthy. His autobiography *Up From Slavery* reflects his hard struggles to establish social equilibrium in America.

Up From Slavery: An Abridgment

Booker T. Washington's autobiography titled *Up from Slavery* is a moving account of the life of Booker T. Washington. His trajectory of life takes the readers to discover many aspects of his life and work. He mainly devoted his life for the uplift of the Negro people who were the victims of the apartheid in the United States of America. He worked with the missionary zeal to support the black people in raising their standard of living. The emphasis on education was his first priority as he thought that it would diminish the gulf between the whites and the Negro people in America. The present autobiography focuses on the plight of the black people including the author himself.

Up From Slavery is a mile stone in the history of African American literature. It reveals his commitment to the educational work and development of the black community of which he was a member. He would spend every day in doing some kind of creative work on the premises of Tuskegee institute. As a Principal of the Tuskegee Institute, he introduced innovative education to the needy and deprived Negro students whose parents had suffered the wild brunt of slavery. Though his philosophy of self-reliance and dedication to work, he was able to transform the lives of the black people living in the South. According to him, all races on the planet earth are equal. Therefore, he made sincere efforts not only to teach the principle of equality but also to bring it in practice. He succeeded in his venture and brought harmony in the relationship between the whites and the blacks in America.



Critical Analysis of Representation of Women in *Up From Slavery*

Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* is fundamentally a male oriented autobiography as the writer himself has unfolded his own life story by way of narrating his selective experiences from his early childhood to the last phase of his life in a very authoritative way. However, there are some female characters that came in his life and shaped his destiny. Among the women characters, his mother played a very significant role in shaping his personality. In fact, she was instrumental in instilling in him the spirit of optimism and love for education.

The Role of Booker's Mother

It goes without saying that Booker T. Washington's life was indisputably influenced by his mother. There is no mention of the name of the writer's mother in the autobiography. Though she remains nameless in the narrative, she is credited for her love and devotion to her children including Booker. She was born and brought up during the slavery and post slavery period. She was exploited by the white plantation owners in the Southern America. She became a victim of the lust of the white man, the farm owner, as a result of which the writer was born. Booker does not know the name of his father nor does he remember the date of his birth. He faintly remembers that his father was the white landlord. His mother lived in a cabin meant for the black slaves on the plantation. It was a very small and dingy place where the writer's mother with her three children lived somehow. The cabin was so small and without any furniture in it. Booker describes:

*"The early years of my life, which were spent in the little cabin, were not very different from those of thousands of other slaves. My mother, of course, had little time in which to give attention to the training of her children during the day. She snatched a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done. One of my earlier recollections is that of my mother cooking a chicken late at night, and awakening her children for the purpose of feeding them. How or where she got it I do not know. I presume, however, it was procured from our owner's farm. Some people may call this theft. If such a thing were to happen now, I should condemn it as theft myself. But taking place at the time it did, and for the reason that it did, no one could ever make me believe that my mother was guilty of thieving. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery. I cannot remember having slept in bed until after our family was declared free by the Emancipation Proclamation. Three children- John, my older brother, Amanda, my sister, and myself- had a pallet on the dirt floor, or, to be more correct, we slept in and on a bundle of fifty rags laid upon the dirt floor."*² (p.19)



It is abundantly clear that the family of Booker T. Washington was the victim of the system of slavery. The family was deprived of the basic necessities of life such as food, clothes and shelter.

Booker's life was immensely influenced by his mother's optimistic views about life. Though she lived in utter poverty almost all of her life as a slave, she was hopeful that one day liberty and dignity would be in the life of her family. She also thought that the sufferings of her family would come to an end with the Emancipation Proclamation. She encouraged small Booker in his attempt to get good education so that he could live a better life and develop his personality in a pleasing way. She knew that wearing a cap in school for small Booker meant a lot. In spite of her utter poverty, she found a way to make one for him. Booker acknowledged in his autobiography that no cap or hat he ever owned meant as much as that was stitched by the hands and fingers of his dear mother. The writer recollects:

“At the end of my second year at Hampton, by the help of some money sent me by my mother and brother John, supplemented by a small gift from one of the teachers at Hampton, I was enabled to return to my home in Malden, West Virginia, to spend my vacation. When I reached home, I found that the salt furnaces were not running, and the coal mine was not being operated on account of the miners being on “strike”. (p. 59)

The above description shows that the mother of Booker T. Washington was not only supported him fervently but she also supported him fiscally. Therefore, it should be noted that the writer's mother was a responsible woman who always wanted to see her son shine on the horizon of education. She wanted to see her son getting good education in every respect.

Olivia Davidson- A Great Servant of Humanity

Olivia Davidson played a major role in the life of Booker T. Washington. When the author opened a school in a stable and a hen-house, he met Miss Davidson there. It so happened that after consulting with the citizens of Tuskegee, Booker T. Washington opened a school in a little shanty and church on July 4, 1881. The white as well as the black people in the vicinity were greatly interested in starting the new school. However, some of the white people questioned about the starting a school for the Negro people. In the midst of difficulties, Washington started a new school in a small and dingy place. On the day of opening the school, thirty students reported for admission. He was the only teacher then. In due course of time, the number of pupils increased and there was a need for another teacher. After a week or so a new female teacher arrived in the school and became his co-teacher. It was Miss Olivia Davidson who became Booker's wife later. She was from Ohio and received her preparatory education in the public schools. Before coming to this new school, she was teaching in a school in Mississippi.



Olivia Davidson was a very cooperative and philanthropic woman. She had a helping nature as she was full of compassion and love for the black community. She wanted to wipe out the tears of the miserable black people in the southern part of America by imparting practical education. When she was a teacher in one of the public schools in Mississippi, she helped a boy who was suffering from smallpox. Booker T. Washington describes:

“While teaching in Mississippi, one of her pupils became ill with smallpox. Everyone in the community was so frightened that no one would nurse the boy. Miss Davidson closed her school and remained by the bedside of the boy night and day until he recovered. While she was at her Ohio home on her vacation, the worst epidemic of yellow fever broke out in Memphis, Tenn., that perhaps has ever occurred in the South. When she heard of this, she at once telegraphed the Mayor of Memphis, offering her services as a yellow-fever nurse, although she had never had the disease.”⁴ (p.96)

This shows that Miss Davidson was a great servant of humanity as she was conscientiously helping out to ease the pains and suffering of the poor people with whom she lived and interacted. Her experience in the South showed that the people needed something more than book-learning. She had heard of the Hampton system of education. Since she wanted to do better work in life, she decided to join Hampton institute where hands-on education was imparted in addition to formal education. She assisted the writer to develop the school in Tuskegee with her innovative ideas and experimentations. She was very particular about the furniture, educational equipment and cleanliness. She wanted to teach students how to bathe, how to take care of their teeth and clothing. She also gave some practical knowledge of industry to the boys and girls in the school where Booker was also a teacher. Both of them helped the black students in every possible way thinking that they would not have to work any longer with their hands. Besides developing the land for the new school and raising loan for its development, Miss Davidson devised a plan to repay the loan by holding festivals and suppers. Therefore, one would argue that the black women were determined to raise the standard of living of the black community in America. She was a representative of motivated African American black women who was a life partner of the author as well.

Miss Olivia Davidson was fundamentally instrumental for the success of the school at Tuskegee because it was she who secured huge funds from the North of America. In 1885 she married Booker T. Washington and continued to divide her time and strength between their home and the work for school. In the true sense of the word, she was a woman who dedicated her entire life for the educational uplift of the black communities. She not only continued to work in the school at Tuskegee but also kept her habit of going to North to obtain funds from the sources known to her and her husband. In 1889, she went to her heavenly abode after four years of happy married life and eight years of hard and contented work for the school.



Therefore, the place of Miss Olivia Davidson in the life of Booker T. Washington was exemplary. It was due her great efforts in collecting funds, the development of the school meant for black students in the South took place. The reflection of her character creates consciousness in the black boys and black girls in America whose ancestors made great efforts to bring them in the main stream of the American society. Her passing away created a vacuum in the life of Booker T. Washington at both the personal level and the school level.

Mrs. Viola Ruffner- Booker's Cheerleader

Mrs. Viola Ruffner was the wife of General Ruffner, the owner of the salt mine where Booker worked in Malden, West Virginia. As an adolescent boy Booker worked as a live-in-servant in the house of Mrs. Ruffner. She was instrumental in bringing positive changes in the life of young Booker as she was a woman who believed in work ethics and cleanliness. She became a cherished friend of Booker in due course of time. The writer was tremendously influenced by her personality. Mrs. Ruffner was very particular in her household duties as she was very uncompromising and highly disciplined. On noticing that Booker was interested in reading books, she encouraged him to pursue education thinking that it would bring refinement in him as an adolescent boy. Though she was a strict disciplinarian, she was very compassionate at the core of her heart. One would notice that she took utmost care of every member of her family including the servants. She did not undermine the services provided by the servants of her house. In the beginning, many servants of her house left the job of housekeeping as they could not tolerate her whims and vagaries. When Booker T Washington came to her house demanding a job, he was very much excited to work in her house. He animatedly accepted her offer as a domestic servant. As soon as Booker started working in the house of Mrs. Ruffner, she introduced some important social censures which later on became the foundation of Booker's epitomes for social and political life. She expected from her employee honesty, sincerity, discipline, cleanliness, promptness and forthrightness. Therefore, she was able to instill in Booker the qualities which were needed to live a disciplined and contended life. She wanted Booker to become a better citizen. Though she was from Northern part of America, she managed her house like a Southern lady. She was of the opinion that both the white and black races could work productively and effectively provided that there was amicable interaction between the two. She, in fact, was a progressive thinker but concerning the household duties, she was very particular. Therefore, it has been noticed that Mrs. Ruffner played a key role in shaping the personal and social life of Booker T Washington.

Miss Mary F. Mackie- A Committed Headmistress

Miss Mary F. Mackie was the head teacher at the Hampton Institute which was devoted to the cause of education for the African Americans who were deprived of their fundamental right to education. She was in-charge of the admission section of Hampton Institute. As a matter of



fact, she came from a well-established family in the North region of America to work in the South especially in the Hampton Institute as she was very much interested in helping the black people of the region in terms of their education and over-all uplift. When she arrived at the Hampton institute, she began to work with great zeal and enthusiasm. In due course of time, she became the head of the Hampton institute. When Booker approached her to take admission in the institute, she conducted his examination in sweeping the classroom and the office. To her surprise, Booker swept the classes so well that she was tremendously impressed by his method of cleaning. She was initially reluctant to admit Booker in the institute on noticing his shabby appearance and dirty clothes. The writer narrates his experience at Hampton Institute as follows:

“As soon as possible after reaching the grounds of the Hampton Institute, I presented myself before the head teacher for an assignment to a class. Having been so long without proper food, a bath, and a change of clothing, I did not, of course, make a very favorable impression up on her, and I could see at once that there were doubts in her mind about the wisdom of admitting me as a student for some time she did not refuse to admit me, neither did she decide in my favor, and I continued to linger about her, and to impress her in all the ways I could with my worthiness.” (pp. 48-49)

Miss Mary F. Mackie was the first person whom Booker met when he arrived at Hampton and she was not at all impressed by his shabby outward appearance. Booker came to her office dirty and disheveled and his appearance made her think he needed testing to prove he was worthy of acceptance. However, she gave him a test in cleaning which he passed with flying colors. He was admitted in the school with effect from that day. In due course of time, she developed profound respect for Booker. She also hired him as a janitor at the school to enable him to pay his school-fees. As the head teacher, Miss Mary F. Mackie extended her cooperation to Booker in terms of financial help and valuable guidance on various occasions. Booker was able to achieve his goal of education due to the opportunity and guidance given by Miss Mary F. Mackie. To him, she represented the joy that the labor could bring in an individual regardless of his/her social and economic status.

CONCLUSION

There are very few women characters in the autobiography of Booker T. Washington titled *Up from Slavery*. All the women who came in the writer's life were the black as well as white women who gave encouragement to him in the pursuit of his education. As the male African American writer, Booker T. Washington depicted the women characters in his memoir without offending their self-respect. The critical analysis of his autobiography shows that as the male writer he does not take liberty to represent the negative side of the women. On the contrary, the writer depicts the positive side of the women and has deep respect for them. Booker T. Washington's women characters though less in number, play a very significant



role in making him one of the greatest educationists and best orators in America. The forgoing critical analysis shows that African American women represented in the male autobiography *Up From Slavery* are great motivators. The budding research scholars may compare this autobiography with the memoirs of the African American women.

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