

Tribhuvan University

Reading Images of Violence in *12 Years a Slave*

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By

Nisha Dali Shrestha

Exam Roll No: 400496/069

T.U. Regd. No: 6-2-718-11-2008

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis paper entitled, “*Reading images of slave in 12 Year of Slave*”

is my original work carried out as a Master’s student at the department of English at RatnaRajyaLaxmi Campus except to the extent that assistance from others in the thesis paper’s design and conception or in presentation, style, and linguistic expression are duly acknowledged.

All sources used for the thesis paper have been fully and properly cited. It contains no material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree at Tribhuvan University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis paper.

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Nisha Dali Shrestha

9 May, 2018

Date

Tribhuvan University

Faculty of Humanities and Social Science

Letter of Approval

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Images of Violence in Steve Mac Queen’s *12 Years a Slave*” submitted to the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus by Nisha Dali Shrestha has been approved by the undersigned members of Research Committee.

.....

Dr. Anand Sharma

Supervisor

.....

External Examiner

.....

Pradip Sharma

Head

Department of English

Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus

Date: 9 May, 2018

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Nisha Dali Shrestha

Abstract

Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* revolves around the film specifically its realistic portrayal of violence and trauma of slavery and the images of the tortured slave body. MacQueen by using realistic cinematography, create a pure representation of experience, to bypass instability and get outside interpretation. MacQueen's *12 Years a Slave* is a realistic autobiographical movie based on Solomon Northup's suffering and trauma during the pre-civil war of south. The slave journey pursued by Solomon and the hurdles he comes across and gets over is the main theme of the movie. The plot, setting and the characters of the movie gives viewers the realistic images of existence of slavery in the history of America, racial prejudice, struggle for social and economic equality, illegal immigration. The director has not just presented a story of slave land but with the hierarchy between blacks and white he has made it a combination of literature and dark history of America. The technology of self-skills demonstrated by Solomon during his journey which seems extraordinary to the viewers.

To analyze the question whether the technology of self-stylization and sound of silent shown by Solomon is appropriate or not, researcher has used the development theory of Foucault's technology of self and the whole thesis is based on researchers own image interpretation of *12 Years a Slave*.

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Reading Images of the Violence in *12 Years a Slave*

Reading an image or Visual reading is the ability to see, to understand, and ultimately to think, create, and communicate graphically. Reading the visual image is looking at an image carefully, critically, and with an eye for the intentions of the image's creator. As Baldick said, "imagery is a mental picture which appeals to the senses" (12). It can both be figurative and literal. For example the mental picture of Solomon in the movie *12 Years a Slave* represents the images of white domination over black people. Thus mental image is a cinematographic skills and it covers multiple skills in the film. These skills can be applied equally to any type of image: photographs, paintings and drawings, graphic art, films, maps, and various kinds of charts and graphs. All convey information and ideas, and allows the viewer to gather the information and ideas contained in an image, place them in context, and determine whether they are valid.

Image is a representation of the external form of a person or thing in an art. It revolves around some meaningful thoughts and ideas. As Johanson said "in a visual age, images are one of the basic modes of communication and the main means to convey social values" (2). The presence of image reflects the certain values and political strategies. Similarly, McQueen in the movie creates prolonged, unflinching images of slave torture and suffering, lingering on graphic scenes of brutality, including whipping, hanging, beatings, and rape. Realist cinematography, by attempting to replicate and recreate the real, can be seen as an attempt to create a pure representation of experience, to bypass instability and get outside interpretation. However, realist images also contain an imbedded ambiguity at the very site of their realism.

In replicating and recreating the real, realist images are framed constantly by what they are not; they are defined continuously and simultaneously by what is not there and could not be

represented. Realism, it would appear, cannot get around this fundamental split. In this way, by representing the real, by recreating experience in order to capture meaning, what is instead represented is the very politics of “seeing” itself. Anaheim, Rudolf has defined:

The word "cinema", short for cinematography, is often used to refer to the industry of films and filmmaking or to the art of filmmaking itself. The contemporary definition of cinema is the art of simulating experiences to communicate ideas, stories, perceptions, feelings, beauty or atmosphere by the means of recorded or programmed moving images along with other sensory stimulations (2-6, *Film as Art*).

Steve Mac Queen's *12 Years of Slave* is a realistic autobiographical movie based on Solomon Northup's 12 years of suffering and trauma during pre-civil war of the south. It portrays the real image of slavery through cinematography. Solomon Northup is the major character of the movie. He is a freeman and lives with his wife Anna Hampton and three children. He was a laborer and a violin player and his wife earned working as a cook. Once Solomon Northup was deceived by two con man. They offered him a job as a musician in Washington Dc's circus. When he reached Washington he was false, drugged, kidnapped and chained. James H Bruch was a slave trader, he was taken to. When he tried to protest, he was threatened and whipped, to get killed unnoticeable to anybody. He was then sold to William Ford who was a good white master. He liked Solomon; his creativity made his work easier through water ways. But unfortunately due to some crisis he had to sell Solomon to John Tibcats. John didn't like Solomon and fought with him and, even hanged him for a day without food and water. John then sold Solomon to crueller slave master Edwin Epps. He was very cruel, whipping and giving punishment was a common thing for him.

There was another slave named Patsy. She was timely brutally raped and whipped by her master. Solomon even after going through all those hard times had preserved his sound of silence. He never lacked the faith and believed that if only he was able to write to his friend will free him from the hell. Once a carpenter called Bass came for constructing building. He was a nice white man; he listened to the story of Solomon and assured him of posting a letter to his friend. Finally, after 12 years of pain, suffering and brutality, he was free. He even reported about James to police on his way back to New York. When he returned to his family he could see his daughters already married and he had a grandson whom they had named Solomon Northup in the honor of their father.

This inspiring movie teaches us to never lose hope and faith even in the hardest time of life. Sometimes the sound of silence and strong determination towards situation can really turn the things in one's favor, Northup's conscience and stability in such situation made him able to fight and punish the culprit. Visual representation of brutality, pain and suffering of black is presented in a very realistic way. Where by presenting all the images of slavery Mac has proved what they are shown. *12 Years a Slave* is a testimony to the power of the human spirit and the enduring determination of hope. Solomon Northup is deceived, kidnapped, abused, removed from family, deprived of identity, and beaten into a long, weary, unjustified submission. Yet he is never broken. Even in his worst days of sorrow he lived under the cruelties of Edwin Epps, he never gives up hope that one day he will be free. He never loses faith in his friends, constantly assured that if he can only get word to the North then they will indeed come to his rescue. And they do.

In the end, Solomon Northup's heartbreaking journey uplifts because in his testimony is evidence that faith and hope can endure and triumph. Is a reading of images of slave suffering as

resistant to historical domination? Can faith and hope provide a base for life? Is there resistance possible even in painful condition of our life? Does mental hope give real images of change? Absolutely there may be some rays of hope even in devastating condition of our life, the prime thing is strong determination and sound of silence should be strong.

Slavery is violent by its very nature. From the physical brutality to the psychological damage enslavement inflicts, a discussion of violence is vital for any conversation surrounding the subject of this institution. In *12 Years a Slave*, the director, cinematographer, and actors present viewers with a disturbing and uncomfortable final product in what cultural historian Dr. Thomas Doherty says “has already been called the most searing depiction of slavery ever projected on the American screen” (5). By lingering on scenes a bit longer (sometimes a lot longer) and providing stark contrasts that highlight the horrors of the narrative, the film forces audience members to confront their own discomfort about the subject head on.

Slavery is a major theme in the “*Twelve Years of Slave*” by Solomon Northup. Slavery is an evil practice wherein one human being owns and treats another as mere property. It is a dehumanizing and malignant practice ended in the United States through the American Civil War. When Solomon is kidnapped and sold into slavery, the Civil War is still two decades off, and the anti-slavery Republican Party has not yet made its mark, nor been founded. Solomon, a free man, is aware of slavery only insofar as he has heard about it, and conversed with the slaves of southerners visiting up the north.

This research will explore the images of existence of slavery in the history of America, racial prejudice, struggle for social and economic equality, illegal immigration and brutality on women in the movie *12 Years a Slave*.



Image: 1

The image is of Solomon Northup, a free northern black man who was captured, beaten and brought to Louisiana to work as a slave. The outward physical appearance shows his feeble condition. He faced oppressive violence from white representative in a white dominated society. In this picture Solomon is looking at far distance hoping for change and freedom from slavery. *The Washington Post's* film critic, Ann Hornaday, said of the film: "Intense, unflinching, bold in its simplicity and radical in its use of image, sound and staging" (4-5), *12 Years a Slave* in many ways is the defining epic so many have longed for to examine, if not cauterize America's primal wound.



Image: 2

Solomon Northup was a man of gifts but he was one man among many. He had pain, suffering and nostalgia of family. His master ordered him to play music to hide the real voice of enslaved children and women. Though his heart denied the command, however harsh command of his master compelled him to tune the violin. In the past his violin used to provide entertainment to the people but now the same tune of that violin was used to suppress the tragic voices of black women. Here Goldman stated “the same object creates double function according to place” (1-44) so the violin represented the sound of pain and suffering in the film. First, Solomon’s transition from loving to loathe his one source of solace-his violin to be taken into examination. The close-up footage of him taking care of his beloved instrument shown at the dawn time directly contrasted a scene nearly two hours later when he had destroyed one. The camera zoomed in on the violin like the previous scene, only then depicting pain instead of care. The scene showed that Solomon carefully tuned his instrument, tightened each string until it

snapped, and then broke its neck into half. The latter of the two scenes separation of Eliza from her children in a slave market and white mistress violent attack on Patsy's face in the party could be significantly related to Patsy's whipping too: it showed how this act had forced him over the edge, to the point where something which once brought him solace represented his suffering then.



Image: 3

The above given image 3 shows how Solomon was tortured and violated by his master, it showed the brutality upon the black people. The white people's oppression and indifference towards the same race is visible in the picture. White people never missed an opportunity to torment the black in the name of slavery. Black people were voiceless, hopeless and pathetic by all the means at this phase of the time. The third figure represents the juxtaposition between entire environment and Solomon's internal pain and suffering, where the environment is on peace; and Solomon is totally restless and clueless about what can free him from the subjugations. In addition to this, Patsy, the other slave was being beaten severely by her mistress. Over all, these figures represent the white's cruelty, dominations and racism prevalent at the then time.



Image: 4

The above image 4 exemplifies the long journey of racial freedom where Solomon is running in the hope of freedom and pursuit of happiness. His desire for freedom is directly visible here. This given shot of film reflects the expectant journey of Solomon for freedom. His facial gestures with his physical condition combined present the mixture of hope and segregation.

Relentless cinematic intensity is prevalent from the very beginning when the camera pushes its way through leaves in the field “closing in like vegetative shackles him (Solomon) cannot hack away”. This scene creates a claustrophobic feeling which sets viewers up for the discomfort to follow. Several times, director Steve McQueen utilizes his actors’ faces to further the themes of distress and pain. According to scholar Deborah E. McDowell, “In giving so much visual and sonic space to the mournful and melancholic—forlorn looks, grieving eyes, audible sobs—McQueen allows us to consider slavery’s devastating hold on the emotional lives of the enslaved” (379). This running signals the seemingly never ending long run for freedom which

protagonist still takes in the faint hope of achieving it. It depicts his desperation and his immense desire for not being chained anymore.



Image 5

This nearly silent (minus a storm brewing in the distance) extended shot of Solomon's angst-ridden face includes a full 14 seconds of direct eye contact. This scene has not received much attention thus far, but I propose that it is one of the most powerful in the film. According to director of photography and camera operator Sean Bobbitt in an interview with *Time Light box*, this is exactly what he was going for in what he attests is his favorite scene:

“His face isn't moving, and yet we see the whole of his life written in his eyes, the compassion and the horror and the dignity all welled up inside him,” he said, “and then he does that little glance into the camera, and it was like a physical blow to the chest. It's so simple and powerful, and for me that's what cinematography should be” (*qtd. in Moakley*).

Extended eye contact can be uncomfortable enough in person since, as Dr. Gwyneth Doherty-Sneddon points out, “Looking at faces is quite mentally demanding (especially) when we are trying to concentrate and process something else that's mentally demanding” (126-27). From a

film with so much difficult material for viewers to process already, these moments are all the more disconcerting. Solomon forces the audience to acknowledge his tortured, hollow eyes, empty yet full of pain as telling of slavery's inherent nature in such an uncomfortable, sanitized, and unashamed way as to show slavery for what it is.



Image: 6

Solomon Northup resists a white slaver and is left hanging for an entire day. It was an extremely bold choice to devote so much time to this shot, but the gamble pays off. While Solomon dangles on his tip-toes, trying to stay alive, life goes on behind him; the previously mentioned shallow depth of focus comes into play here, where those behind him go on with daily life, just out of focus. The only people in focus are the slavers; the wife who comes to watch on the deck and then walk away. The young girl risks herself being punished to feed him water and behind him, slaves do laundry, trying to ignore his suffering. The editing and cinematography make the audience feel like they are constantly circling him, like the slaves behind, wanting to do something to help but unable to leave their seats.



Image: 7

The climax of the film, where Solomon is forced to whip Patsy, is notable for its use of hand held cameras in a single shot. The audiences didn't even realize at the time of watching that it was one shot, because it was too focused on the intense emotion of the scene. Then, after reading about the film, I realized that there weren't any cuts in the image. The camera gets right into the moment, capturing every stroke of the whip on Patsy's bleeding back. But it does something quite remarkable too, while pushing into the moment; the camera remains invisible to the viewer, because it takes on the actions of a bystander.

The two scenes in particular receive the most attention within critical conversations about the film: the hanging of Northup and the whipping of Patsy. The incredible violence and inhumanity depicted in these moments certainly render them memorable, but the more subtle aspects of the cinematography are what truly make them stand out from the rest of the film. With the hanging scene, Bobbitt was not about to let the audience off easy. In an interview with the Hollywood Reporter, he said, "Each of the (hanging scene) shots is held for a long period of

time, specifically to make the audience as uncomfortable as possible and to force them to reflect on what was happening to Solomon and how terrifying that must have been”(2). The uncut 1:26 minutes footage of the film forces the audience to watch as Northup balances on his toes in the mud to prevent his suffocating in the noose. With little action on screen except for a few slaves going about their business in the background and hardly any noise but the sickly squishing of sludge beneath his toes, this scene is purposefully brutal to watch when the camera finally breaks from this angle; viewers get a moment of respite.

The film’s next two minutes of Northup’s struggling to stay alive represent the hours he had to wait for his own relief (which, notably, must come at the hands of his master) by showing the daylight changing and other slaves going about their daily activities in the background.

“What was very important is that the audience gets a sense of the passage of time, and sense the length of the shots, that feeling of the duration of the day,” said Bobbitt. It is important here to refer how this theme of relief without resolution continues through to the end of the film when Solomon is finally rescued from slavery. In that moment, though relieved for his salvation, the audience also experiences unfulfilled yearning for a happy ending to Patsy’s story too as she only fades further into the background, a lingering message of slavery’s still unresolved legacy in both history and modern times alike.

The suffering Solomon faces in his hanging contrasts with the anguish he is forced to inflict on a fellow slave in the other highly-discussed scene: Patsy’s whipping. Continuous shooting was important to the crew to depict this extreme inhumanity. Bobbitt said to the Hollywood Reporter: That was always going to be one continuous shot; the audience is given no relief. Once you put a cut in, then subconsciously everyone is aware that they are watching a film, and it lets them off the hook, Particularly for a scene like that, with the complexity of the

emotions and the violence going on, it really acts to heighten the drama and the performance of the actors.

In this continuous shot totaling a whopping 6:21, the camera includes “multiple perspectives of victim, perpetrator, unwilling participant, and enthusiastic onlooker”. This observation is certainly important; thus, I wish to delve further into its implications. The cinematography avoids jump cuts between perspectives since these leaps tend to give viewers the sense of “jumping” into individual characters’ heads for certain moments of a narrative. Instead, the film opts for an omniscient, authentic, and continuous shot which shows the events and the various people involved blatantly as they are.



Image: 8

The cinematographic representation in the present film is very creative; one significant element of this scene has gone generally unnoticed. It is only after following the soap the small, pure, innocent cause of so much violence, wretchedness, and suffering fall gently to the ground from Patsy's hands that the camera finally breaks. But, instead of offering a moment of relief to the audience, it does the opposite: the screen goes straight to a shocking shot of Patsy's lacerated back, "the most extreme and horrid of the many images of bodily harm in *12 Years a Slave*". By doing so, the film demonstrates how even something or someone, innocent, clean of any stain of guilt, can be twisted and warped through the violence of slavery.

The break between the scenes also shows how, in the life of a slave, there are no moments of relief; even when one expects a reprieve, she may only face further suffering. By imposing this feeling of hopelessness and apprehension on the audience, these scenes force viewers to experience and confront their discomfort with the violence of slavery. By making the

audience uncomfortable instead of opting for a more sanitized version of the story, this film draws attention to the twisted nature of slavery through these unrelenting depictions of depravity.



Image: 9

This is a representative image of this film where black people are sitting together to share their tragic feeling with each other. There is communal feeling going between them as Mask Dorm has said that “communality is result of pain”. Here is communal feeling going on after getting pain and suffering from white people. So these three people sitting together share their heartbeat cries.

These black people are sitting together but there is no any sense of revolt in them as they have already accepted their failure. In every parts of the films, blacks are shown either killed, brutally tortured, hanged or raped for their mistakes or their fate to be born black. There is shown no mercy for any black. Though Solomon was timely accused for being quiet and choosing oppression, Solomon’s self-stylization to tackle the situation and sound of silence at the end turned out to be way of victory against slavery.



Image: 10

In addition to these scenes of violence, I would also like to emphasize how this film's cinematography provides stark contrasts which make the audience view these events in a different light than they may have without these contrasts. Several times, setting itself provides contrast. Toward the beginning, the camera focuses on patriotic symbols. When Solomon is beaten and held in a cell, the camera pans from the barred window up to a picturesque view of the Capitol Building and other easily-recognizable D.C. landmarks. Harvard professor John Stauffer points out how, later in the film, one can see the Washington Monument through a spinning paddle-wheel of the ship taking Solomon south which "zooms toward us, filling the screen, suggesting the closed society in which it heads" (318). In addition to his observation, one can also elaborate by saying that these juxtapositions of the institution of slavery with contemporary symbols of patriotism serve an additional purpose: they force the audience to the uncomfortable acknowledgement of the horrors in the country's history and their reverberations into the present.

Setting the rest of the film in Louisiana gave the crew the opportunity to present visuals as “an ironic compensation during all the human miseries” since “all would be beautiful were not the impenetrable landscape a natural penitentiary”. A prime example of Doherty’s point at 33:00, is when the camera shows silhouettes of nature and then pans to a line-up of slaves. Later, when Solomon is whipping the overseer Tibbeats, the wide camera angle shows the violence of the act juxtaposed with the calm of the scenery.

This reading, thus, remarks observe how the use of dark versus light conveys disparity by allowing viewers to experience despair along with Solomon. When he first finds himself a captive, the scene sharply breaks from the brightness of his last meal as a free man to the pitch blackness of his cell. His flashbacks to the night before are increasingly darker as they progress, symbolizing his descent into a living hell. At the night’s close, the men blow out a candle as they also blow the life and hope from his existence for the 12 years to follow. Later, when a fellow laborer betrays Solomon’s trust, light from a lantern goes away, leaving him in the pitch black with only his despair. He throws his letter into the fire, and viewers watch as the embers slowly fade away, creating a growing sense of hopelessness as Solomon’s hope dies along with them

Cinematographic temporality also aids in this depiction of contrasts while also contributing to our discussion of discomfort. By using combinations of long takes and close-ups, Bobbitt creates a sense of “slow-as-molasses meteorology” (12). Even when the camera does move unencumbered, the freedom it depicts is contrary to the subjects it captures. According to Doherty, in order “to evoke Solomon’s stranded and locked-up condition, McQueen keeps his camera horizontal and close to the ground, taking his time to look straight at a vista or a face, with a minimum of non-diegetic music” (7). Indeed, along with emphasizing Solomon’s lack of

freedom, the film also demonstrates how his relativity in regards to time is completely dependent on his master. According to McDowell, “at every level of *12 Years a Slave*, McQueen 24 Hampshire meditates on time and measures progress in painfully incremental steps and stages, For Solomon, as for the viewer, time passes all too slowly” (376). Whether it be progress on Solomon’s difficult road to freedom or his daily labors at the hands of his abusers, the painstakingly slow pace forces viewers to look at suffering far longer than they would wish.

Through these cinematographic strategies of temporality and disparity, one can come to a further appreciation for what this film accomplishes in terms of its depiction of slavery. Along with adding emphasis to their respective moments, these techniques also aid in the overall depiction of this brutal institution’s violent nature. *12 Years a Slave* puts the audience members in a situation where they must either turn their eyes from the violence before them (as we so often do) or face that brutality and what it means that we are so disconcerted by it. However much we might want slavery to be the straightforward, sanitized problem of the past that so many films make it out to be, *12 Years a Slave* forces us to face the fact that this peculiar institution still has reverberations into the present.



Image: 11

The major theme in Northup's narrative is the constant and unrelenting hardship of plantation work. This images that Northup captures in his descriptions of life and labor on the plantations of Louisiana depict the sheer exhaustion, monotony, and fear that each slave struggled, physically and psychologically. As Northup recalled, although Patsy was a faithful slave and worked in the cotton fields for her master's profit, she became the helpless victim of her master's lust. Pasty's mistress took her jealous anger out on her female slaves instead of finding fault in her husband. "Nothing delighted the mistress so much as to see (Patsy) suffer," noted Northup. He continued, "more than once, when (master) Epps refused to sell her, has she tempted me with bribes to put her secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp." (12) Doubly abused by the sexual terror and physiological torment of her master and mistress, respectively, Patsy's story represented the brutality of slavery experienced by bondswomen. At the hands of white men, Northup made clear, black women were sexually and physically exploited with impunity during slavery. This normalization of

sexual exploitation of slave women reflected the racist perceptions and stigmatization of black women.



Image: 12

Similarly, Female slaves also faced the separation of families and children. In this account, Northup noted the intense emotions of female slave mothers at the auction block. Relating the remorselessness of white slave traders who disregarded the feelings of slave mothers separated from their children, he recalled the intense grieving of a female slave named Eliza after she had been forcibly separated from her two young children. Eliza was overwhelmed with grief when a new white master purchased her children and not herself. As Northup noted, all the time the trade was going on, Eliza was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She besought the man not to buy (her child), unless he also buys herself and (her other small child). She promised, in that case, to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively.

Forced to confront with the realities of fleeting motherhood as a slave, female bondswomen suffered terribly from the emotional separation of themselves and their children in the uncertain world of the American slave trade. By displaying the abuse black women suffered

during slavery—from sexual terror, physiological torment, and the separation of families—
Northup's narrative was able to evoke sympathetic antislavery feeling in the Northern states in
the decades before the Civil War by exposing the horrors upon its innocent victims.



Image: 13

In examining slavery, the focus on the cycle of abuse tends to remain on the interaction between female slaves and their male masters. Any relationships existing between the mistress and female slaves were often overlooked, or downplayed as being friendly or even familial. As shown in popular slavery films like *Django Unchained*, and even mildly in *12 Years a Slave*, female slaves were often depicted as being workers within the home who fulfilled many of the roles a traditional homemaker would, from cooking to cleaning. In contrast, because the domestic tasks were well-taken care of, mistresses developed relationships with these slave women in a quasi-friendly nature, as displayed in works like *Gone with the Wind*. In the duration of the Margaret Mitchel novel-based film, the bond between Scarlett O'Hara and Mammy is portrayed as more of a maternal disposition where the slave acted as a nanny for a young woman until she grew older.

12 Years a Slave shatters this serene portrait by deploying characters such as Mistress Epps and Patsy, showing the darker side of the mistress-female slave interactions as being one of

hatred and jealousy. To fully understand this shift in presentation of women in slavery, it is important to understand the false mutual oppression of both women in slavery. Often, it seems that both sets of women were subjected to dominance by the slave master, leading to both groups being viewed as victims. Although this is true, we less often examine how this can lead to the mistress's abuse of the female slave to empower herself. Lastly, it is equally important to expose the clash between the women's roles in slavery that transformed into a relation of violence from a mistress towards a slave.



Image: 14

Upon looking at slavery witnessed in *12 Years a Slave*, it could be argued that mistresses and female slaves were found in the same predicament in their oppression within patriarchy. Master Epps belittles Patsy, a female slave that is highlighted as his favorite for the amount of work she can accomplish in comparison to the other slaves. This earns her the title of “Queen of the Fields,” which in turn captures the plantation mistress’ attention. Outraged by the energy Master Epps places in praising and eyeing Patsy, Mistress Epps demands for her husband to end his improved attitude towards and treatment of Patsy. Master Epps refuses, for he thinks of himself as the ruler of the entire plantation, his wife unequal to his status, and blatantly ignores her requests, leaving the audience a glimpse of how mistresses were oppressed by their husbands.



Image: 15

During this parade of lunacy on behalf of Master Epps, Mistress Epps enters the scene to investigate what the slaves are performing. This is when her eyes are set on Patsy, with whom Master Epps has taken the liberty to dance. Upon doing so, she disrupts them and comes face-to-face with Patsy. She finds herself torn because she has been beaten out socially by an individual who is supposed to be inferior to her status. Once she realizes this, she confronts Patsy by shattering a glass and raking it down her face. Screaming in agony, a confused Patsy has blood rush profusely from her face and is taken away to be cared for. The scene illustrated above refers to many reasons why white slave women were active participants in the cruelty against their slaves. If it did not scare obedience into the slave, the purpose was then to find a way to disrupt any relationship between the slaves (Patsy) and master (Master Epps). Collectively as females, both sets of women were subjected to mental abuse from a typically controlling and overbearing white male master, admittedly. Despite this similarity in circumstance, female slaves emerged as the individuals suffering the most abuse, becoming sexual objects for masters to prey upon.

Alongside, they became victims of the mistress' violence for these unwanted sexual advances from the master. Although the Scarlett O'Hara's and Mammy's of the film industry would have consumers think otherwise, there was a much darker side to the relationship between the two women who held the master's attention, unwanted (by the slave) or yearned for (by the mistress). This dimension of the mistress-female slave relationship is a side often kept within the darkness of the same shadows that conceal the painful truth of being a female of color in the Confederate South.

In this regards, these shot contextualizes the paradoxical instability of McQueen's realist images of the trauma and violence of slavery and the discourse that surrounds them within a larger lineage of the history and politics imbedded in the depiction of slavery within visual culture. Taking the ambiguity of McQueen's realist depiction as its own political site, where the audience is confronted simultaneously with the violence of slavery as well as with the inherent impossibility of its representation, this analysis probes the ways in which McQueen's realist images actively resist and exceed the historical frame, getting at fundamental questions of trauma and representation in relation to the violence and collective memory of slavery.

Although the mistress was ranked higher in the social hierarchy, both the mistress and the female slave answered to the male master of the land. Mistresses were viewed as psychological slaves to their husbands through their lack of equality in status. Within her essay Charlotte Arbogast goes into the shared "property" state of both women saying, "The confines of gender for white women in southern society also meant that upon getting married, white women turned into a form of 'property' for their new husbands" (12-16). This reality was showcased in several ways that dominated a mistress' typical life. She was expected to serve as a child bearer, maiden of the household, devout Christian, and entertainer, everything that comprised the picture of

domesticity. Typically, the slaves belonged to the master. As a result, oftentimes there would be a power struggle between a mistress and her husband, as any orders from the husband would override requests by the mistress. An imbalance in slave control between masters and mistress could thereby be attributed to the gender-specific roles within the community in which slavery occurred.

Buhle, Murphy, and Gerhard, American historians and professors at assorted U.S. universities, explain the lack of feminine power due to her domination in the private circles (i.e. household function concerns), whereas her husband was within the public circles (associated with politics and economy) With his role being the financial provider, this introduces another layer of complexity of reliance that the slaves and mistress both had, concerning the master. Without the men to supply money and conduct business, the mistress and slaves were thought to be lost, as the mistress held little social standing; meanwhile the slave held none at all. For example, both women and slaves did not have a voice within politics to interject their own opinions for change, which speaks to the mistress' near-nonexistence and the slaves' nonexistence in the realm of politics. Mistresses themselves were still involved in social networks more so than slaves, as they did have certain rights and were active in engagements with other society members, which were key rights that slaves were deprived of.

When considering the mistreatment of female slaves at the hands of their mistresses, the physical harm is what comes to mind primarily. Even women who did not own slaves themselves sought out slaves as the gateway for them to achieve true housewife status. Within his study, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, Harvard University professor William Johnson develops the idea that:

If a mistress was to have house slaves, they would clear her of having to perform the physical labor of being a housewife. She would still be credited as being responsible for a successful domestic life without having to endure the physical labors of doing so, fulfilling her time leisurely with her family and hosting acquaintances (79-162).

Here, the abuse of power over house slaves were something that seduced many mistresses and led to violence as a possible, a coercion tactic to encourage obedience.

Despite domination being necessary in order to secure social status, others have shined a light on the emotion aspects of producing such violence. Conflict would arise in that “many incidents involving the cruelty of a mistress also involved a female slave’s alleged intimacy with the master”. Arguably, the free women who committed these infractions against slaves felt threatened by slaves who were supposed to be of a lower social standing than them. The mistresses’ real anger stemmed directly from the very system in which they found themselves. Michaela Davis discusses the challenge to their position that the mistresses felt and the inability they had to confront their husbands about the white male supremacy that prevented them from advancing on in the hierarchy. Thereafter, the mistresses would oppress any slaves that had relations (unwanted or not) with her husband in order to deprive him of one avenue of pleasure he sought out. Within the movie, the compliance of Mistress Epps with the slave system is appalling and one that makes the audience root against her. Her use of violence towards Patsy was a theme throughout the movie that was sickening, a derivative of the grotesque animalistic advances of Master Epps on Patsy. As Patsy improves throughout her time at the Epps’ plantation, this awards her the attention of Master Epps. While he takes a greater notice of her, Mistress Epps is in the wings, watching exactly how far Master Epps will take his taboo

relationship with Patsy. Soon enough, Mistress Epps notices that Master Epps finds attraction in the qualities she does not possess herself, such as extreme physical labor; productivity. A particular scene of image 14 below reflects the mutual sharing of agony between Patsy and Solomon, seeing hope and freedom in their eyes, even though both are victim of racial discrimination and chained.

Conclusion

Through cinematographic strategies of temporality and disparity, this film comes to a further appreciation for *12 Years a Slave* accomplishes in terms of its depiction of slavery. Along with adding emphasis to their respective moments, these techniques also aid in the overall depiction of this brutal institution's violent nature. *12 Years a Slave* presents audiences with such difficult viewing material that is free of sanitization. By doing so, it puts the audience members in a situation where they must either turn their eyes from the violence before them or face that brutality and what it means that we are so disconcerted by it. However much we might want slavery to be the straightforward, sanitized problem of the past that so many films make it out to be, *12 Years a Slave* forces us to face the fact that this peculiar institute still has reverberations into the present.

In this regards, McQueen's *12 Years of Slave*, perhaps the most pervasive revolves around the film realism specially its realistic portrayal of the violence and trauma of slavery and the image of tortured slave body. Solomon's demeanor throughout his journey that mental hope gives real image of change and hope and faith can be base for life even in such harsh situation of life was the problem detected by the researcher. After analyzing the film through Neo- Marxist view on culture politics and politics of representation. Taking Foucault concept of technology of self it is proved that sometimes sound of silent and self- stylization works to end the difficult situations of life.

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