

Bosničová, Nina

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Brno studies in English. 2004, vol. 30, iss. 1, pp. [125]-133

ISBN 80-210-3631-1

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104315>

Access Date: 21. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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NINA BOSNIČOVÁ

**LONELY FIGHTERS AND COMMUNAL TALKERS:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MALE AND FEMALE
SLAVE NARRATIVES**

When writing about male and female slave narratives, literary critics have a tendency to make some gender-related generalizations concerning the narratives' treatment of the themes of family and resistance.¹ The most important among them is the common contrasting of male slaves as "solitary heroes" and female slaves as "selves-in-relation". Another is the frequent distinction between physical confrontation as a typically slave man's and "verbal warfare" as a slave woman's tool of resistance. By using examples from the four most widely-known slave narratives, this paper aims at showing that the above-mentioned conclusions, although if in rough terms valid, need yet to be refined to reflect accurately the reality of the texts themselves. The stories under scrutiny are as follows: *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831), *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), and Harriet Jacobs's (or Linda Brent's) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861).

In her book *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, Valerie Smith suggests that, unlike those by women, "most of the narratives by men represent the life in slavery and the escape as essentially solitary journeys" (33). In her comparison of Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives, Yvonne Johnson seems to agree with Smith. The conclusion she comes to is that whereas Douglass likes to present himself as an isolated hero in his quest for freedom, Jacobs never forgets to mention the people "who help her develop a sense of self" and "finally make her freedom possible" (Johnson 41). It proves fruitful to examine to what extent the above-claimed difference between Douglass's and Jacobs's stories applies not only to these two narratives, but rather forms the basis of an important contrast between male and female slave narratives in general.

Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* is the story of a lonely man, an isolated hero, who, after a long struggle to survive in the New World, finally accepts its culture and, above all, its religion as his own. If in his narrative we do not find too many references to family or community as a source of help and support through the hardships of life, it is because of the experience Equiano went through. Being torn from his African relatives at the age of eleven, he is forced

to cope alone with the notion of his enslavement as well as the “wonderments [...] of the West” that he encounters upon his first contact with the white culture of his enslavers (Gates 155).² The final impression the reader gets is that Equiano comes to the ultimate understanding and acceptance of the New World’s culture by means of his own intelligence and craving to learn new things. Still, one should not forget that he refers to his fellow Africans as the first mediators between the African and the European “ways”. They, he comes to show, were the ones who helped him overcome the initial horror of enslavement and cultural confusion, and thus survive his first months in slavery. As he says:

In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of these what was to be done with us. They gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people’s country to work for them. I was then a little revived, and thought if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate. (34)

If, in Equiano’s narration of the following events of his life, a sense of community is missing, it is the result of the fact that he never really had a chance to become a true member of a community. Constantly traveling on board various ships, changing environments as well as masters, the only relationships he was able to form were, with high probability, of a rather short duration.³ Additionally, if any support or help from some of the sailors was received at all, it probably did not leave a strong imprint on Equiano’s memory. However, even if “a tightly woven web of connections with other people” is absent in Equiano’s story, Equiano never forgets to mention, even if briefly, the kindness and hospitality that some white English people showed him while he stayed in their households (Johnson 41). For instance, while talking about Mr. Guerin’s sisters with whom he for some time resided, he says: “[they] were very amiable ladies. They took much notice and great care of me” (46). At the same time, Equiano discusses the role that some white people played in his conversion to Christianity which he comes to see as by far the highest accomplishment and reward of his life in the New World.

Smith claims that Douglass, while using the genre of autobiography⁴ and addressing his narrative primarily to the representatives of white mainstream culture of the northern U. S., chooses to “define himself according to the values of [...] [that] mainstream culture” (27). He, Smith continues, decides to offer his readers the American “myth of the self-made man” which would confirm the belief “shared by generations of American men that inner resources *alone* can lead to success” (27; emphasis mine). When Douglass’s *Narrative* is read in this light, it seems more understandable why he feels the need to present himself as an isolated hero and to diminish the role of other people he encountered and was helped by on his route from slavery to freedom.

If Douglass is to confirm his gained manhood and equality to the white reading audience, he has to write in terms acceptable to them. He needs to make clear that what led to his current position was his own intelligence, resourceful-

ness and strength, rather than the constant support from family and friends.⁵ Although Douglass acknowledges the existence of the members of his extended family (grandmother, aunts, etc.), he never comes to show that they served in any substantial way to alleviate his sufferings in slavery. Douglass also mentions his fellow-slave's, Sandy's, wish to help him by giving him a mysterious root that "would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me," but he, more or less, disregards it as a piece of superstition (Douglass 49). Douglass shows his readers that it is merely his physical and psychological strength, self-reliance and determination that help him win over Covey. Further, Douglass originally plans to run away with several of his fellow slaves, but finally makes the treacherous journey alone. At last, Douglass's "intended wife", Anna, must have been a source of tremendous help and support, not only emotional, but also financial,⁶ while Douglass was still enslaved (Douglass 70). All the same, he mentions her for the first time in a single line towards the end of his narrative. All the examples clearly prove that Douglass's intention was to give his readers "the classic story of the triumph of the individual will", rather than "a story of a triumphant self-in-relation" that we find in Jacobs (Smith 33). The only time when Douglass acknowledges the help of other people is, similarly to Equiano, in the case of the whites who help him make his first steps in freedom.⁷ The main reason for this lies in Douglass's wish to publicly express the feelings of respect and gratitude held for the white people in question without whose support he would have hardly "made it" as an "isolated person" in the North.

Prince's *History* can be seen as a mixture of the fight for survival of "the individual will" and "the self-in-relation". While still living in the same community with her parents, Prince acknowledges them as a tremendous source of help. After having been mistreated by her master, Mr. I-, she runs away and is hidden by her mother "in a hole in the rocks" and daily brought food and water (Prince 197). Her father on the same occasion tries to entreat Prince's master to treat her more kindly in the future. Later, when Prince lives in Antigua with her master and suffers badly from rheumatism and Saint Anthony's fire, it is an old slave woman who takes care of her. She brings her soup and tries to lessen Prince's agony by putting her in a bath made of "the bark of some bush that was good for the pains" (Prince 203–04). Prince acknowledges the kindness of this woman when she says: "I don't know what I should have done, or what would have become of me, had it not been for her" (204). The author also makes clear her gratitude to "the Moravian ladies" who taught her to read, while still in the West Indies, and to the white people, especially the members of the Anti-Slavery society, who helped her survive after her arrival in England (Prince 206).

However, while Prince admits that the help from her family and other people was of great importance in her survival battle, she also shows that she, rather than constantly relying on those around her, tried to help herself on her own as well. She argues with her master and mistress, asks for better treatment, and works hard in order to make money and buy her freedom. Additionally, she makes an independent decision to walk away from her master's household in England, despite the fact that she is a total stranger in English society. Once free,

she feels reluctant to be financially dependent on the Anti-Slavery society and says: "I would rather work for my living than get it for nothing. They were very good to give me a supply, but I felt shame at being obliged to apply for relief whilst I had strength to work" (213). It could be added here that by saying so, Prince, probably sub-consciously, overturns the long-established stereotype of black laziness and child-like dependence on whites.

Even if Jacobs's voice in her narrative is often described as a prototype of the voice-in-relationship (See Smith, Yellin, Johnson, etc.), and her narrative as a celebration of "the cooperation of all the people, slave and free, who make her freedom possible," Jacobs's story is more than that (Braxton, qtd. in Johnson 41). Among the four discussed authors, Jacobs is the one who gives the strongest tribute to the help and support she obtained from other people in her attempt to fight slavery and the condition it imposed upon her. However, just like Prince, she cannot be seen as merely waiting for someone's help, but rather as a determined person, who, as much as possible, tries to rely on herself in order to help not only herself, but, above all, her children.

Already the first chapter of Jacobs's *Incidents* focuses not on the "I" so typical of other slave narratives, but rather on "they" – her relatives: her grandmother, her father, her mother and her brother Ben.⁸ This tone is retained throughout her story. Jacobs presents her grandmother as a great source of emotional support and as a role model. Aunt Marthy, however, helps in a more "visible" way too, by hiding Jacobs in the garret of her house for seven years and bringing her food and water. Jacobs also gives tribute to the character of Sally, who helped her immediately after her escape from Dr. Flint, as well as to the white woman who hid her in her house for some time, before she moved to her grandmother's place. Jacobs does not forget to mention her advisor, uncle Phillip, and her friend Peter who not only spends a night with her in the Snaky Swamp, but also arranges for her faked letters to be sent to Dr. Flint and, most importantly, helps her escape to the North. Interestingly enough, during her escape again she is not alone, but accompanied by another black woman and a friendly white captain. Moreover, just like the other three authors, she by no means diminishes the role that kind white people played in her attempt to survive once she arrives in New York and then in Boston, especially Mrs. Bruce, whom she calls "a friend among strangers" (512).

Jacobs's focus is on people who helped *her*, but her story is also about her wish to help the others. She *de facto* lets her fellow slave woman, Fanny, whom she knows is hiding in the neighborhood, have her place on the boat headed towards the Free States. She also makes it clear that what she is doing is for the sake of her children, rather than her own. And finally, the very act of writing her narrative can be seen as a reflection of her wish to help those still enslaved.

Despite the amount of help that Jacobs admits to having received while trying to break free from slavery, she should not be looked at as a person merely relying on other people's resourcefulness. On the contrary, she could be described as a very determined, intelligent and ingenuous individual who tries to improve her condition and that of her children. With her possibilities greatly limited, she uses, as Yellin tells us,

her garret cell as a war room from which to spy on her enemy and to wage psychological war against him. From her cramped hiding place, she manipulates the sale of her children to their father, arranges for her daughter to be taken north, tricks her master into believing that she has left the South and, quite literally directs a performance in which Dr. Flint plays the fool while she watches, unseen. (“Introduction”)

It is interesting to realize here that, even if Jacobs’s story is, on the whole, that of “a triumphant self-in-relation” (Smith 33), it could also, in one particular way, be described as a story of “the heroine as an isolated individual” (Johnson 26). After all, Jacobs spends most of her narrative alone, confined first in the house of a white lady who helps her after her escape and later in her grandmother’s garret. Over that time she has no contact with her children and very little with other members of her family.

After having discussed the gender-based difference in the slave narratives’ dealing with the theme of family and community, it should now be asked whether there are any differences in the male and female slave’s expression of disagreement with their unjust position. As mentioned earlier, male slaves, in their rebellion against slavery, often resort to physical confrontation with their masters and overseers. This re-asserts their sense of manhood, because they perceive it as “a contest to a masculinity achieved through physical domination” (Ferguson 311). Female slaves, on the other hand, usually too weak to fight a slaveholder physically, rely on “resistant orality”, putting to use their speaking abilities (Mullen 259). To them “verbal warfare and defensive verbal postures [serve] as tools of liberation” (Braxton, qtd. in Johnson 37). Among the four stories, this distinction holds well for Douglass’s, Prince’s, and Jacobs’s narratives. Equiano’s book, in this respect, stands apart for several reasons that I will suggest below.

Scholars have often pointed out that one of the central scenes in Douglass’s *Narrative* is that of his fight with his overseer, Covey (See Smith, Gibson and Ferguson.). Smith claims that “if the acquisition of literacy first enabled [...] [Douglass] to feel free, the act of physical resistance [against Covey] precipitates his second and lasting period of liberation” (25). Douglass himself confirms this when he calls the “battle with Mr. Covey” the “turning point in my career as a slave” and “a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (50). The author goes on to say: “It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free” (50). Douglass’s rebellion against his overseer is successful – he tells us he never again gets whipped, although he remains a slave for the next four years.⁹ Its most important outcome, however, does not lie in Douglass’s subsequent evasion of physical punishment. Rather it should be searched for in Douglass’s following realization: “however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (50). Clearly then, Douglass asserts his “psychological sense of being free” which to him is “more meaningful than his actual escape to

the North” (Gibson 555). In the author’s view, Gibson suggests, “a person is a slave [...] not when his body is held captive but when his psyche is not his own” (556). Since his victory over Covey gives Douglass a sense of mental and spiritual liberty, it should be perceived as a climax of the author’s struggle to regain his manhood and selfhood which he had lost through slavery.

Unlike the male protagonist of Douglass’s work, the slave women in Prince’s and Jacobs’s stories use “verbal blows” (Johnson 37). Prince finds the means of resisting her master’s sexual harassment by verbally assaulting him. She says: “I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man – very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh” (203). In a similar way, Prince reprimands her mistress for her constant abuse. She remembers: “I bore in silence a great deal of ill words: at last my heart was quite full, and I told her that she ought not to use me so; – that when I was ill I might have lain and died for what she cared” (204–05). Finally, Sandra Pouchet Paquet considers Prince’s “departure from the Woods’ household in England [...] a particularly rich example of her preemptive verbal skills” (136). In this scene, the author announces the following to the other servants in the house: “I am going out of this house, as I was ordered; but I have done no wrong at all to my owners, neither here nor in the West Indies. I always worked very hard to please them, both by night and day; but there was no giving satisfaction, for my mistress could never be satisfied with reasonable service [...] now I am going out” (212). By doing so, Prince transforms the private space of her relationship with her owners into “a public space in a speech act that parodies their ownership in a series of verbal assaults” (Paquet 136). This, in her case, functions as one of the few accessible weapons used to express her disagreement with and resistance against her unpleasant situation.

In Jacobs’ narrative it is not only Jacobs but also her grandmother who uses the power of speech in her struggle against the injustices of slavery. We learn that Dr. Flint is afraid of Aunt Marthy, because he dreads “her scorching rebukes” (362). It is in Jacobs’ grandmother’s ability to reproach Dr. Flint verbally that she finds a tool of protection for herself and her granddaughter. She passes this capacity on to Jacobs who becomes a master at using “impudent speech in order to defend her own body against abuse” and domination by her master (Mullen 256). To Dr. Flint’s question ““Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you, – that I can kill you, if I please?,”” Jacobs replies: ““You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me”” (371). By saying so, the author bravely asserts her independence from her master and her determination to stand up for her rights as a woman and a human being. When her master accuses Jacobs of being “criminal” towards him the moment he finds out she is pregnant with Mr. Sands, Jacobs again defends herself verbally. She says: ““I have sinned against God and myself [...] but not against you”” (389). In this manner, she lets her master know that she scorns his authority and that she does not consider him a person justified to consider the morality of her actions. It could be claimed that for slave women “verbal warfare” fulfills the same function as physical struggle does for slave men. It gives

them a sense of self. "The slave narrator's identity is linked to his [/her] desire for freedom and 'the act of resistance is the backbone of his [/her] selfhood'" (Butterfield, qtd. in Johnson 37). According to Johnson, Jacobs' "selfhood is tied to her voice, for her act of resistance is expressed in that voice" (37).¹⁰ The same, of course, can be said about Prince and her use of verbal self-defense.

In terms of the typically male means of resisting slavery, Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* stands apart. There is not a single instance in the book of the author's resorting to physical violence in order to defend himself against the unfairness of slavery. Rather, if Equiano decides to voice his protest against something, he chooses, similarly to the female slaves mentioned above, the tool of verbal attack. When he is on the point of being sold to Captain Doran instead of being freed as promised, Equiano protests: "I told him [Capt. Doran] my master could not sell me to him nor to anyone else [...] 'I have served him [...] many years, and he has taken all my wages and prize-money, for I only got one six-pence during the war. Besides this, I have been baptized; and by the law of the land, no man has a right to sell me'" (65).¹¹ There are, I think, several possible explanations of the fact that Equiano, unlike other male slaves in the narratives, does not use physical confrontation as a means of resistance. The first is that the author is, as he himself admits at several places in his story, treated relatively well by his owners throughout his enslavement. He is never severely whipped and therefore does not feel the need to use such a radical type of rebellion as a fight can be said to be. Another reason is that he wishes to present himself to the reading public as a well-assimilated English gentleman. As such, he is forced to employ reasonable discussion, rather than physical violence, as a road towards the expression of his opinion and the fulfillment of his goals. The third cause lies in Equiano's tremendous piety. As a "true Christian" he reacts to injustice not by striking back, but rather by turning the other cheek to his enemy.

To conclude, the description of male slave characters as "solitary heroes" and female characters as "selves-in-relation" proves not to be absolutely applicable. Even if on the whole it applies, it fails to acknowledge the other significant aspect of the female narratives, which is a sincere wish and effort of the narrators not only to rely on others, but also to engage in various activities to help themselves. The above analysis has further shown that there is sometimes a gender difference in the way the slaves protest against their subordination and abuse. Whereas men use physical confrontation to express disagreement, women have a tendency to employ "verbal warfare". The outcome of the two methods, however, serves the same purpose. It helps the slave re-assert his/her sense of humanity and selfhood. Whereas the given distinction is valid for Douglass's, Prince's, and Jacobs' narratives, it is not reflected in Equiano's story. Equiano, presenting himself as an English gentleman and a good Christian, rather than using violence, tries to sort out unpleasant situations through convincing argumentation and reasonable discussion.

Notes

- ¹ As my final-year dissertation “To Survive as a Slave: A Comparative Analysis of Slave Narratives” has argued, these two themes, in addition to the theme of religion, form the cornerstone of the vast majority of works in the slave narrative genre (and very likely of African American autobiographical writing as such).
- ² “A watch, a portrait, a book that speaks,” Henry Louis Gates says, “are the elements of wonder that the young African encounters on his road to Western culture” (155). One could add Equiano’s misinterpretation of his enslavers’ intentions with him, his total unfamiliarity with snow, etc.
- ³ The only exception to this tendency is Equiano’s description of his childhood friendship with a white boy, called Dick, for whom he felt a great deal of affection, as the third chapter of his narrative proves.
- ⁴ It is important to realize here that this particular genre has for a long time been established as a “white European male domain” (Johnson 18).
- ⁵ Smith claims that “by mythologizing rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographical mobility, the [male] narratives enshrine cultural definitions of masculinity” (34).
- ⁶ Deborah E. McDowell tells us that Anna Murray, Douglass’s wife, a free black woman, “helped to defray the costs for [Douglass’s] runaway scheme by borrowing from her savings and by selling one of her feather beds” (175).
- ⁷ See, for example, his description of the behavior of Mr. Ruggles and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson (70–73).
- ⁸ In her “Introduction” to Jacobs’s *Incidents*, Jean Fagan Yellin says that Jacobs “presents herself in relation to both racial groups that make up the closed society of the town, and she suggests the complex interrelationships connecting four generations of her grandmother’s family and four generations of their masters” (xxix).
- ⁹ A scene of physical resistance against a cruel overseer can also be found in William Wells Brown’s narrative. Brown narrates a story of a strong slave, Randall, who, rather than allowing Mr. Cook to whip him, decides to confront him and three of his men physically. Brown remembers: “They [the men] came up to where Randall was at work, and Cook ordered him to leave his work, and go with them to the barn. He refused to go; whereupon he was attacked by the overseer and his companions, when he turned upon them, and laid them, one after another, prostrate on the ground” (20). Randall, unlike Douglass, loses the fight, since he gets shot and tied and later “has a ball and chain attached to his leg” (20). All the same, Randall’s decision to fight should be perceived as an example of a specifically male slave’s way of standing up against injustice and unfair treatment.
- ¹⁰ Jacobs not only gives a voice to herself, but also to other slaves in her narrative. “Because she associates the slave’s humanity with defiant or subversive speech, resistant behavior, and the ethics of reciprocal relationships, as well as with writing and individual autonomy, Jacobs affirms the humanity of the collectivity of slaves as well as the successful fugitive and literate narrator” (Mullen 261). In this respect her story differs from Douglass’s who, being literate and educated, is the only “vocal” slave in the book, whereas the rest of the slave community remains silent throughout his narrative.
- ¹¹ Equiano uses his verbal skills at several other places in the story. For instance, when he is accused by his master of wanting to run away, he, through his eloquent argumentation, manages to convince him to the contrary (91–92). By means of the power of speech, the author also succeeds in persuading his master to sell Equiano his freedom (100).

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