



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-VI, Issue-IV, February 2020, Page No. 55-60

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v6.i4.2020.55-60

By Birth a Slave, by Struggle a Fugitive Slave & by Gift a Freeman:

William Wells Brown

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Abstract

William Wells Brown is born in to slavery. He confesses in his narrative that no two of his siblings are born for the same father. Such is the condition of slaves and particularly women slaves in antebellum era. Brown is close to his mother and his sister. His sister gets sold and taken down the South. He makes his first attempt of escape along with his mother but fails in his efforts. His mother is then sold just like his sister. Brown works for many masters at St. Louis city. Brown succeeds in his second attempt and escapes to northern states of United States of America. From there Brown helps runaway slaves to escape to Canada while working on a steam boat on Lake Erie. He tours Europe by giving lectures on the evil institution of slavery, gathering public support against slavery. His European friends purchase his freedom in 1854 and gift him, because American congress passes a new law by name 'Fugitive Slave Law' in 1850. According to the new law, the runaway slaves are re-enslaved by capturing and sending them back to the rightful owner in the southern states. Brown becomes an active member of the abolitionist movement that is fighting vehemently for total emancipation of slavery in United States of America.

Keywords: Antebellum Era; Sexual Abuse; Slave Trade; Fugitive Law; Purchasing Freedom; Abolitionist Movement.

The worst inhuman activities of the slaveholders of the antebellum era of Kentucky State can be seen in William Wells Brown narrative. For having born as his master's property, Brown is stolen from all human rights of a great nation. His mother's name is Elizabeth, and he has five brothers and one sister. No two siblings of Brown are of the same father. Brown learns from his mother that John Higgins, a relative of his master is his father. Foster F. Smith rightly observes that:

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Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, included discussion of the social and political relevance of their experiences. They enjoyed an especially good market during the pre-Civil War period, for they provided details about the life-styles and attitudes of southern whites and blacks for many who simply wanted to know more about the South. (Smith 20)

Brown's master is having forty slaves, and most of them are field hands. Soon after, his master moves to Missouri and settles a few miles above St. Charles. Unrequited toil of the slaves begins at 4:30 a.m. Brown is lucky as he is placed as a servant at the house. Here, he is given sufficient food and better clothed. Slaveholders try to instilled submissive thoughts to slave children, so that when they grow up they will not be rebellious. Marie J. Schwartz talks about the intentions of slaveholders that:

Owners who purchased children of this age were more interested in instilling habits of obedience and subservience for the future than in obtaining useful services right away. (Schwartz 88-89)

One day Brown's mother is late to work by a few minutes. Brown knows by the voice that, it is his mother who is facing the punishment, and all he can do is to cry his heart out:

Experience has taught me that nothing can be more heart-rending than for one to see a dear and beloved mother or sister tortured, and to hear their cries, and not be able to render them assistance. (Brown 2)

Brown's master takes his slaves to St. Louis city to the new farm. Here Brown is hired to a slaveholder Major Freeland from Virginia. Major Freeland an incorrigible drinker and will first Whip a servant and then smoked them with fire made off tobacco stem and names it as 'Virginia play'. One day Brown unable to bear the torture of Major Freeland escapes and hides in the woods. He is hunted down by bloodhounds of Major Benjamin O'Fallon. Brown is put at St. Louis Jail. Major Freeland takes Brown and smoked him after severe whipping. Robert the son of Major Freeland is young and always returns home intoxicated. The slaveholders often turn cruel to set their slaves on the right path but never pay much attention to their own children.

Major Freeland fails in his business, and keeps Brown on the steamboat. Brown is having a pleasant time during that sailing season. Later, Mr. Colburn, the proprietor of Missouri Hotel hires Brown. Mr. Colburn is from Free States but very abusive towards slaves. The slave laws or black codes are designed to control slaves and protect the slaveholders. Deborah H. DeFord states that these slave codes will apply for African Americans:

Every slave state of the South had slave laws, or Black Codes, that dictated what African Americans, both enslaved and free, could and could not do. (DeFord 84)

Brown comes to know that he is sold by his master to a slaveholder of St Louis city. Elijah P. Lovejoy, who works as a teacher, hires Brown. It is here that Brown obtains his

little learning as a slave. Education helps Brown to go a long way in life. Frederick Douglass stresses a lot regarding educating of slaves:

Education means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free. (Douglass 355)

Next Brown is hired to Capt. Otis Reynolds and who employs him to wait on gentlemen. While travelling, Brown sees many free people. Brown grows unhappy and always thinks to escape to Canada. Brown gives up the idea of escape as he is reminded of his mother. Among all his relatives, his mother and sister are very dear to him. Brown shares with mother and sister about his planned journey to the North. To this, his sister first rejects the idea but later supports him, "If we cannot get our liberty, we do not wish to be the means of keeping you from a land of freedom." (Brown 10-11)

Later Brown is hired to Mr. Walker a slave trader, who takes slaves from St Louis city to New Orleans. Brown finally leaves Mr. Walker, who has been destroying slave families. Brown is told that his sister is sold to a slave trader. She is kept in jail for safety. Brown's Master asks him to go to the city of St. Louis to find work. Brown is free for a week to find work. Here, Brown heads to the jail to meet his sister for one last time. It is a day of heavy emotions for Brown.

Brown reaches the place of his mother and decides to go to Canada but she rejects because most of her children are in the South. On the other hand, Brown is not in a position to have liberty without his mother's freedom. Brown persuades her and they start their journey. There is a rowing boat with its help they cross the river bidding farewell to the city. They take cover in the woods during daytime and walk at nights. They do it to avoid being caught. Deborah H. DeFord observes that there is strict vigil to catch the runaway slaves:

Southern states such as Kentucky and Delaware organized extensive slave patrols in hope of stopping the northern flow of fugitives. (DeFord 84)

Brown knows very well that his mother's master Mr. Mansfield will alert Brown's Master Dr. Young. Both Brown and his mother are caught by three men, on seeing an advertisement given by Mr. Mansfield and Mr. John Young offering two hundred dollars. Mr. Jones, who brings them back to the St. Louis city jail, informs Mr. Mansfield. Mr. Mansfield comes and threatens Brown's mother either to sell her to a slave trader or he will go down to New Orleans to sell her.

After a week Brown's master sends a man for Brown. A few days later Brown's master returns from a brief trip to the city and informs Brown that he sold Brown to a merchant tailor named Mr. Samuel Willi. On the advice of the new master, Brown finds work on a steamer Otto, with J. B. Hill as its captain. Little later Brown gets shocking news that his mother is sold. Brown fails to get an interview with his mother who is kept in jail for safety. Finally, he meets her while shifting to the ship. It is a heart-wrenching scene and Brown expresses:

I approached, threw my arms around her neck, kissed her, and fell upon my knees, begging her forgiveness.... (Brown 34)

Brown blames himself for making his mother's condition pathetic. She does not blame him. She confesses that she may not survive long on the cotton plantations. On seeing Mr. Mansfield coming towards them, she says the following, "Now try to get your liberty! You will soon have no one to look after but yourself." (Brown 35)

Mr. Samuel Willi sells Brown to Captain Enoch Price for seven hundred dollars. Soon, after Brown's purchase, Mrs. Price wants him to marry Maria her slave. However, Brown is not interested in marriage. Brown has come to Captain Enoch Price in October, and he accompanies Mr. Price's family on a journey to New Orleans in December. After a few days they decide to visit Cincinnati. Brown believes that, this journey to be his best opportunity to set himself free. Captain Enoch Price fears and asks Brown's opinion about northern states. Brown replies that, he never likes the Free States. Brown wins the trust of his master and is part of that journey. Brown is very cautious not to reveal his intentions to escape. Brown is excited very much about the next day, which is the first day of the coming year.

That night Brown does not sleep for a single moment. The boat lands and people are busy. Brown goes to the wharf carrying a trunk and soon disappears. He immediately heads to the woods and conceals himself, till it is dark.

Brown wants to change his name back to William from Stanford. William is the name which his mother gave him. He is sold under the name Stanford. Brown thinks it will be prudent for him to change his name back to William. Brown become chilled and benumbed due to heavy rain. His feet are frostbitten, and yet he keeps walking in that condition for two days. Brown feels that he is less afraid of death than the thought of getting caught and carried back. Brown then walks up to the road and sees an aged man and seeks his help. The old man promises to help and takes him home. Brown comes to know that the old couple are Quakers who belong to a religious society of friends founded by George Fox. Brown is surprised to see white people being so kind towards a slave.

To Brown it is still a mystery why the old couple are so good to him. Wells Brown is the name of the old man. The hospitality of the old couple is such that they make clothes and brings a pair of shoes. Brown comes to know that he is hundred odd miles from Cleveland on Lake Erie. Brown is very critical about the idea of the American nation that gives its citizen freedom, to mistreat other fellow human beings:

While the people of the United States boast of their freedom, they at the same time keep three millions of their own citizens in chains; (Brown 46)

The old man Wells Brown suggests Brown to have two names. To that, Brown asks the old man to give him a name. The old man says the following words, "If I name thee, I shall call thee Wells Brown, after myself". (Brown 46) Brown adds the name William to Wells Brown and there after he is known as William Wells Brown.

Brown moves ahead and again falls short of provisions. He approaches a farmhouse for help, but is rejected. The land lady of the farmhouse offers help to Brown against her husband's wish. From that moment, Brown decides to fight for the rights of women. Brown arrives at Cleveland, Ohio. The lake is frozen and has to wait until navigation resumes in the lake or go to Canada through Buffalo. Brown comes to the calculation that he is almost out of danger. E. M. Segur the proprietor of the Mansion House hires Brown for twelve dollars per month. Later Brown gets an excellent job on Steamboat. Mitchell states that slave narratives show the journey from slavery to freedom and not just slavery:

The slave narrative is always written by a former slave; there are no slave narratives, only narratives about slavery written from the standpoint of freedom. (Mitchell 190).

While Brown is at Cleveland, he purchases few old books and comes across an antislavery newspaper titled "Genius of Universal Emancipation" published by Benjamin Lundy. Friends of slaves knew very well that Brown will carry fugitive slaves without any charge to Buffalo or Detroit. It gives Brown immense pleasure to help slaves to reach Canada; he confesses that "In the year 1842, I conveyed, from the first of May to first of December, sixty-nine fugitives over Lake Erie to Canada." (Brown 48) Next Brown devotes much of his time to liberate slaves. He grows critical about continuing the institute of slavery. As a fugitive slave he is threatened by fugitive slave law of 1850. For safety he goes to Europe and returns only after his freedom is purchased by his European well-wishers. Brown fights for the total emancipation of the evil institution of slavery in America through his writings.

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