

VIOLENCE AGAINST AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVES AS SEEN IN SOLOMON NORTHUP'S *TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE*

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Abstract : The purpose of this study was to reveal about violence against African-American slaves; the kinds of violence and impacts of violence to the slaves in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. This study is classified as a qualitative research because the writers gathered the data in the form of words as well as quotation from the work itself. The writers collected the data from two kinds of sources, namely primary source and secondary source. The primary source was taken from the novel *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup, and the secondary sources are the other material that supports the research such as books, articles and websites. This study used a Sociological approach which regards the literary work as a social document that reflects the situation when the literary work was created. The results of this study showed that there are two kinds of violence against African-American slaves in Northup's work; physical violence and psychological violence. The acts of violence was received by the slaves result in some impacts include physical impact such as, suffering in pain, injury, and sick; and psychological impact such as, fear, trauma, and depression. Through sociological approach, it can be concluded that the novel *Twelve Years a Slave* really explained the real social condition of African-American slaves that occurred in the 19th century, where they experienced acts of violence from their white masters during slavery

Keywords : *Violence, Slavery, African-Americans, Solomon Northup.*

INTRODUCTION

America has "a big social class difference in their society, especially among the ethnic," (Sampson & Wilson, 2020). There are a lot of ethnic groups in America and one of them is African-American. The African-American people are those who originated from Africa, move to America and live as American citizens. Foner as cited in Adawiyah (2015) explains, "Around 1492 and 1820 the Africans are transported by the British colonizer to the New World. The African-Americans became one of the larger ethnic groups that exist in the United States."

In America, slavery transformed the economy of the country as well as the demography, ecology, and culture of many

regions (Young, 2020). The slave trade grew the system of slavery throughout America. According to Buell (2004), a horrible aspect of American history is slavery. People were reduced by the system to nothing more than private property. Both the church and the state approved of the arrangement, which was lawful (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Without having an opportunity to realize their aspirations, millions of slaves lived and died. There was no rule that forbade white masters from physically abusing black slaves (Patterson, 2018). When trying to exert authority over their slaves, white masters frequently utilized violence (Milewski, 2019). These realities can be seen in many historical documents, even in a novel entitled *Twelve Years a Slave* written by Solomon Northup.

Twelve Years a Slave is a “personal narrative of Solomon Northup who was a free-born African-American from New York but then kidnapped and sold into slavery,” (Thaggert, 2014). The story of Solomon was originally published in 1853. What makes this work interesting to study is the spirit of Solomon to live and survive through slavery, which gives the readers inspiration to never give up. As Solomon described the struggle, he endured during the twelve years of slavery, the writers found out that Solomon and the other African-American slaves received a lot of violence from their masters.

Through his literary work, Solomon shares the real situation of slavery that occurred to African-Americans in the 19th century. Through literature, the authors reveal the issues that occur in life. Wellek & Warren (2014) explains that Literature is a social institution that uses language as its medium as a social creation. Literary works have been influenced by society and have the potential to have an impact on society. Literature can also broaden readers' understanding of life because it contains values about human life (Pattiwael, 2019; Widjayanti, 2019; Oztemel & Gursev, 2020).

In last 10 years, there are many studies related to the violence against African-Americans and studies related to the *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. Wilderson III (2015) discusses the social death and narrative aporia in *Twelve Years a Slave*. The main difference between his research and this study is the object. The work of Wilderson III (2015) focuses on the film *Twelve Years a Slave* directed by Steve McQueen. In 2015, Adiwiyah conduct a study on racism against African-American Slave in Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. Adiwiyah's work focuses on racism and the forms of racism in the Northup's *Twelve*

Years a Slave. On the other hand, this study focuses on the violence, its forms and impacts to the African-Americans as reflected in Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*.

Ball's work entitled *The Unbearable Liminality of Blackness: Reconsidering Violence in Steve McQueen's 12 Years a Slave* written in 2016 focuses on the film *Twelve Years a Slave*. Other studies also focus on the film *Twelve Years a Slave*. For instances, Li (2014) focus on the Neo-slave narrative depicted in *12 Years a Slave* film directed by Steve McQueen. Alfred, Natsir and Setyowati (2017) analyze the slavery experienced by Northup as the main character in the film *12 Years a Slave*. In 2021, Julan, Surya and Valiantien (2021) conduct a study on discrimination issues in the film *12 Years a Slave*.

As seen from the previous research mentioned above, it can be seen that most of the research using the film *12 Years a Slave* as the object of the research. This research, on the other hand, using the book *Twelve Years a Slave* written by Solomon Northup in 1968. The issue presented in this research also has not been discussed by other researchers in the last 10 years. So, this research tried to investigate the violence, its kinds and impacts depicted in Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*.

African-American Life in 19th Century

African-Americans did not receive the same level of respect as other people (Pryce, et. al., 2021). They frequently fell victim to racism. Their rights were restricted, and they were excluded from the American political, social, and even economic advancement (Wacquant, 2017). The majority of African Americans experienced poor treatment and were forced to work as slaves for white people. The African-Americans were suffering from

social equality and a lot of them live in poverty. Apart from poverty, racism from white people to African-American people causes social isolation. As described by Oroh et al. (2003), "the white and black neighborhood are separated and there must be little interracial contact because the whites only see themselves." The difference in their skin color makes white people have thoughts that the African-American deserve to be treated as bad as they want. According to Oroh et al. (2003), "The whites' negative perception of African-American as evil, wicked and harmful creatures, just to justify their exploitation of individual African-American slaves and to allow a brutal slave system."

The African-Americans experienced violence brutally in their life because of the difference in their race. The American society also believed that the black skin of African-American represents dirty. As stated by Menggalomo et al. (2020), "Because of the representation as dirty race, black race keeps suffering from the discrimination by white race, they are hurting physically and mentally." Back in the 19th century, both slaves and freeman were live under the pressure of white society.

Violence

Violence could be found everywhere and has never been separated from human life. According to Hufad (2003), social standards cannot be used to excuse acts of violence committed by one individual against another or by one group against another for whatever cause. Adi as cited in Pattiradjawane et al. (2019) defines violence as "a form of aggressive behavior that causes suffering or harms others." Based on the foregoing, it is possible to conclude that violence is a behaviour or an

action that has a negative impact on the person who receives the action.

Adawiyah (2015) divides the kinds of violence in 5, they are: physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, emotional violence, and spiritual violence. Physical violence is referred as an act "when someone uses a part of their body or an object to control another person's action," (Blok, 2020). Physical violence includes hitting, slapping, and other physical act using weapon or other objects. Hitting, slapping, and other physical acts with a weapon or other objects are all considered forms of physical violence. Gerber and Jackson (2017) defines psychological violence as an act "when someone uses threats and causes fear in another person in order to gain control" Threatening to harm the person or treating a person likes they are unworthy to live. The examples of this act are threatening to hurt someone or acting as though they are not worthy of life.

Sexual violence occurs "when someone is coerced into engaging in sexual activity they do not want to," (Fedina, Holmes & Backes, 2018). It includes forcing someone to read pornographic content or engaging in sexual contact without their consent (Maddocks, 2018). Emotional abuse is when someone says or does something to make another person feel unworthy (Nhi, et. al., 2018). Emotional violence includes frightening someone or making fun of them, as well as humiliating them (McDonald & Martinez, 2019). Spiritual violence is an act "when someone manipulates or oppresses another person because of that person's spiritual convictions," (Oakley, Kinmond & Humphreys, 2018). It also includes making fun of someone's spiritual or religious practices (Yelderman & Miller, 2017).

Violence can result a negative impact on those who experience witness it in their life (Mueller & Tronick, 2019). There are two main effects that affect a person's life when they are the victim of a violent act, they are: physical impact and psychological impact (Myhill, 2017). Physical impact is one of the most visible impacts when someone receives violence is physical harm (Hughes, et. al., 2017). The effect of continuous violence on someone physically, can make the victim suffered from injury caused by the action. Psychological Impact is when someone can have a serious psychological damage because of the acts of violence (Bryant-Davis, et. al., 2017). Creating fear or even depression is another result of violence when the victim cannot express their emotion or even defend themselves. Act of violence can also create a traumatic to the victim, even worse can make the victim commits suicide (Rahmi & Siregar, 2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, the writers applied a descriptive qualitative analysis. The writers used library research to find the theories related to this research. Therefore, the data source is from the novel itself, including some quotations and other sources from the internet to support the research. Bogdan & Biklen (1992) identified the following five general features of qualitative research: Data are gathered in the form of words and images rather than statistics; the research is concerned with both the process and the products; Inductive analysis of the data is typical in qualitative research: How people interpret their life is a significant issue in qualitative research; the natural instrument is the main source of data; and the writer is the instrument's key.

In conducting this research, the writers collected the data which related to the topic

chosen. The primary source was the novel itself, *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. The secondary sources were other references related to the novel like articles, books and data from internet that can add more information about the novel or the topic chosen for the research.

To analyze the data, the writers used sociological approach to analyze the novel. According to Laersonson and Swingewood (1972), sociology aims to provide an answer to the question of how society is possible, how it functions, and why it endures. It is fundamentally a scientific, objective study of man in society. It means that in order to examine a literary work using the sociology of literature as the theoretical framework, the authors had to make a connection between the situation in the literary work and the social context in which the novel was written.

According to Wellek & Warren (2014), there are three kinds of sociological literature studies:

1. Sociological author, concerned with the author as the creator of literary work that influenced by the society. It regarding to social background and social status of the author;
2. Sociological literary work, concerned with the literary work itself. Sociological literary work explores the content of literary work which have a relation with the real situation that occurs in society;
3. Sociological reader, concerned with the relation between readers and the literary work itself. To see how the literary work effect the readers through the social aspects of readers' life.

Based on the theory of Wellek & Warren (2014), the writers applied the second perspective which is sociological literary work to show how the literary work

reflected the real situation that occurs in society when the work was written.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

According to Laurenson and Swingewood (1972), literature as an aging mirror. It suggests that readers can debate social phenomena that occur to society during a specific time and location through literary works. It related to the definition of novel according to Wellek & Warren (2014), "Novel is a description of the life, the behavior of an era when the novel was written". *Twelve Years a Slave* is an example of literature as a description of the reality in life because it contains the real situation that occurred to the author of the novel.

Through the sociological approach, the writers found the similarity or the relation between the novel and the reality that happened to the African-American slaves in 19th century. During slavery, African-American slaves were the object of violence by their masters. The act of violence can make the victim suffering not only physically but also mentally. In sum, violence can harm its victim who received the action. However, the African-American slaves had to bear with any kinds of violence from their masters, and could not do anything to defend themselves, because all rights were only granted to slave holders. There were kinds of violence and impacts of violence to African-American Slaves based on novel *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup.

African-American Slaves Condition in Society

Because literary works capture the true nature of human life in society, they cannot be divorced from human life. Literature "always reflects about the social and cultural event that transpired in society," (Sabudu, 2020). So, it makes sense that the

sociology of literature gives literary works attention as a mirror of human life that has a connection to society.

During the slavery, it really showed that the whites were superior and the blacks were inferior. The African-American slaves who worked in a house were not allowed to go to the front door, have to eat in the kitchen and were not allowed to make any inquires of their master. The social distance had made the white and black cut off from cross racial relationship. Such measures tended to keep black people as much as possible out of direct contact with white people.

None of the slaves is allowed to study, because they were the lower class in the society. According to Zarlina (2013), the possibility for slaves to be able to communicate is severely limited because masters forbid them from learning to read and write. It related to Solomon's story as he described the cruelty of his master if he gets caught read or write, can be seen as follows:

"If he ever caught me with a book, or with pen and ink, he would give me a hundred lashes. He said he wanted me to understand that he bought "niggers" to work and not to educated," (Northup, 162).

The Kinds of Violence

The story of novel *Twelve Years a Slave* portrayed the social situation that occurred to the author as an African-American. According to sociological theory, literary works reflect the realities of a given society's daily existence (Wellek & Warren, 2014). This is connected to a statement by Laurenson and Swingewood (1972) which advocates the connection between literature and sociology. Fundamentally, sociology is the objective, scientific study of man in society, as well as the study of social institutions and social processes (Laurenson and Swingewood 1972). Through sociology, literary work can be learned as a social document that reflect the real situation in society. In Solomon's *Twelve Years a Slave*, the African-Americans were suffering because of the cruelty of white people who being the superior in the society.

The writers found there are two kinds of violence against African-American slaves that can be seen in *Twelve Years a Slave*, those are; physical violence and psychological violence.

Physical Violence

The first kinds of violence against African-American slaves in novel *Twelve Years a Slave* is physical violence. Physical violence refers to an action that can make the object of violence having a physical suffering. According to Adawiyah (2015) the use of physical force that results in pain, discomfort, and injury is referred to as physical violence.

"Radburn placed his heavy foot upon the fetters, between my wrists, holding them painfully to the floor. With the paddle, Burch commenced beating me. Blow after blow was inflicted upon my naked body. When his unrelenting arm grew tired, he stopped and asked if I still insisted I was a free man. I did insist upon it, and then the blows were renewed, faster and more

energetically, if possible, than before," (Northup, 21).

The quotation above shows that it is forbidden for someone who has been sold to a slave holder to talk about their past. However, Solomon had no idea about it and insisted not to follow Burch's order. It is a bad move if an enslaved person does not listen to their owner. Slaves are usually punished with a lot of lashes on their bodies.

The slave holders or usually are called Master and Mistress, were the one who determined the slaves' work. According to Berlin et al. (2011), the demands of the masters heavily influence the slaves' labor schedules. Slaves worked for their owners for the majority of their waking hours, days, and lives without being paid. There were lots of rules for the slaves in plantation and they had no time to be lazy. If the slaves did not follow the rules, they would get punishment as follows:

"The fastest hoer takes the lead row. He is usually about a rod in advance of his companions. If one of them passes him, he is whipped. If one falls behind or is a moment idle, he is whipped. In fact, the lash is flying from morning until night, the whole day long," (Northup, 114).

According to the quotation above, there was rarely that a day passed by without one or more whippings in plantation. The slaves literally were suffering because of the lash, making the scream of the slaves, can be heard from dark till bedtime.

Slave holders had rights to do whatever they want to their slave. Violence perpetrated against a slave by a master acting in the course of his or her power was not punishable by the same laws that forbade assault, rape, and even murder (Berlin, et al., 2011). Most of the slave holders treat their slaves like they are no human. Edwin Epps was an example of a

master who always employs violence to maintain control over his slaves. He would beat his slaves whenever he want, in any condition, sober nor drunk. Master Epps can even act worse when he was drunk, as seen in the quotation bellow:

“If Epps was not drunk, and in one of his beastly humors, this was, in general, satisfactory. If he was, someone or more of us must suffer, as a matter of course. Sometimes his violence assumed a dangerous form, placing the lives of his human stock in jeopardy. On one occasion the drunken madman thought to amuse himself by cutting my throat,” (Northup, 160).

Psychological Violence

Psychological violence is the second type of violence depicted in the Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*. When someone attempts to exert control over a victim by using threats and terror, this is known as psychological violence. Slaves were subjected to psychological abuse in addition to physical abuse by their Masters. Solomon also received psychological violence from Burch before he sold Solomon to the South. Burch forced Solomon not to talk about his past anymore and threaten him as follows:

“He swore that he would either conquer or kill me,” (Northup, 22).

Similar to cattle or other livestock, slaves are treated as property and have no choice over their daily existence. They are commonly offered for sale at slave auctions, where interested buyers can examine them thoroughly (Zarlina, 2013). When a slave owner wanted to buy a new slave, they would ask the slaves about themselves and it was forbidden to slaves to talk about their past, even though they were kidnapped and enslaved.

Solomon received another threat from Burch when he unconsciously answered to

a slave owner that he came from New York. The answer made Burch angry and threatened Solomon, as seen in the following quotation:

“He looked at me a moment as if he was ready to devour me, then turning round went out. In a few minutes he returned. “If ever I hear you say a word about New York, or about your freedom, I will be the death of you—I will kill you; you may rely on that.” he ejaculated fiercely,” (Northup, 34).

Slaves were not allowed to talk behind their masters. If they were caught talking while working, it would make the masters furious. It happened to Solomon when he tried to comfort Patsy as she scared of drunk Epps. Unfortunately, the master noticed them and as a result, Solomon received another threat during his enslaved days as follow:

“What did you say to Pats?” he demanded, with an oath. ...with a malicious sneer, at the same time taking hold of my shirt collar with one hand, and trusting the other into his pocket. “Now I’ll cut your black throat; that’s what I’ll do,” drawing his knife from his pocket as he said it.” (Northup, 160)

From the quotation, it can be seen that white masters would do whatever they wanted to their black slaves just because they were superior in the society.

Impacts of Violence

Literature and sociology have a relation because both are related to the social aspect which is the relationship of human with their environment in society. The impact of the social environment and literary facts are two ways that sociology can be studied (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972). Literature and society are connected in a two-way relationship known as sociology of literature (Ratna, 2004). As seen in the novel, work with white masters made most of the slaves had to deal with a lot of

violent acts, which gave some impacts to the slaves, not only physically but also psychologically. Those impacts were described as follows:

Physical Impact

One of the most visible impacts when someone receives violence is physical injury. As someone who never experienced such violent act, Solomon was shocked at the brutal treatment that he received for the very first time in his life. The impact of violence made Solomon suffered so much, can be seen as follows:

“I thought I must die beneath the lashes of the accursed brute. ...in fact, I was becoming almost unable to speak,” (Northup, 22).

Moreover, even after the act of violence happened, the impact of it still remained on his body as follows:

“By this time I had become stiff and sore; my body was covered with blisters, and it was with great pain and difficulty that I could move,” (Northup, 23).

Deal with violence during work for hours with a very little rest make many slaves think of running away from the plantation. However, it is a bad idea and dangerous for the slave’s life if they are get caught by their Master. It happened to one of Solomon’s fellow slaves, Wiley, can be seen as follows:

“After being kept in suspense three days, Wiley was stripped, and compelled to endure one of those inhuman floggings to which the poor slave is so often subjected. It was the first and the last attempt of Wiley to run away. The long scars upon his back, which he will carry with him to the grave, perpetually remind him of the dangers of such step,” (Northup, 170).

The quotation above shows that the impact of violence leaves scars on slave’s body that he will carry for the rest of his

life. Most bad Masters will punish any slave who tries to escape with no mercy.

Psychological Impact

Act of violence can create fear, trauma, or even depression to the victim. At the very first time Solomon received the act of violence, he was covered in fear inside the prison can be seen as follows:

“A human face was fearful to me, especially a white one,” (Northup, 22).

Slaves who worked on plantation were always required to work with a lot of rules, no laziness nor being slow or they would get punishment from their Master. Solomon described how the punishment brought fear to him and his fellow slaves whenever they worked as follows:

“If it fall short in weight—if he has not performed the full task appointed him, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day’s task accordingly. So, whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house always with fear and trembling,” (Northup, 116).

According to the quotation above, it can be seen that most of the slaves always be overthinking and afraid of the result of their work because if they do not reach the target, they will be punished. The master's rage was directed at the slaves and If they do something wrong, they will suffer severe punishment (Zarlina, 2013). Therefore, even when they rest, fear always haunts the slaves.

Accepting too many physical or psychological violence can result a negative impact on people who experience it. Patsey, the young girl who were mostly suffering because of the cruelty of Master Epps and the jealousy of Mistress Epps. She was a joyous person who liked to laugh with people around her. However, as she grew up, she became more silent than

she was because of her miserable life as follows:

"If ever there was a broken heart—one crushed and blighted by the rude grasp of suffering and misfortune—it was Patsey's," (Northup, 184).

A lot of slaves live their life miserable since they were kid or even born as a slave. Patsey is the example of how a young slave lived her life desperately. She even asked Solomon to kill her and buried her somewhere because she was tired with her life, as seen in the following quotation:

"...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," (Northup, 132).

The quotation above clearly shows how the act of violence can change someone's psychological from a young cheerful girl, into someone who does not even want to live her life anymore.

CONCLUSION

After analysing the data, the writers found out there are two kinds of violence against African-American slaves in *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. Those are physical violence and psychological violence. Physical violence was experienced by Solomon and his fellow slaves in the form of whippings, beating, and stabbing. While psychological violence such as threats from slave holders.

Furthermore, the impacts of those acts of violence made the slaves suffer not only from pain or physical injury but also from fear and depression caused by the acts of their white masters and mistress. Slaves were not allowed to study and would get punishment if their master caught them with paper or pen. Most of white masters used violence to gain control over their slaves. The African-American slaves also received racial discrimination from the

society, which were mostly white people because of their black skin. By using a sociological approach in analyzing the data, it can be concluded that there is a relation between the social condition of African-American slaves during the slavery in the 19th century and the novel *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup.

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