



Encountering Racism and Oppression in African American Life Writing

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ABSTRACT

The study “Encountering Racism and Oppression in African American Life Writing” focusses on analyzing the texts such as William Wells Brown’s *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847), Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1901), and Malcolm X as well as Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) under the lens of Postcolonialism. These texts are placed across a temporal and a spatial dimension thereby plotting the history of the evolution of African American population in the American society. The study does a multifaceted comparative analysis of the texts from several angles based on a scathing indictment of chattel slavery, and the marginal status of the oppressed, exploited, and the dispossessed in a multicultural society. The texts serve a fertile ground for exploration of oppression based on race, and class. The notions of nation or nationhood, questions of identity, preoccupations with race, language, class, power, cultural integrity of the oppressed, the self-determination of the exploited subjects, the notions of aporia, ambivalence, and indeterminacy, reworking of colonial art forms, and the notions of “other”, “hybridity”, “mimicry”, and “subaltern” are explored within the purview of these texts. The appropriation and domestication of language is an aspect that is observed in all the three life writings.

Introduction:

Literature of a culture is known to be the self-portrait of that culture which gives valuable insights into the culture that produced it. African American life writing is rooted in the Afro-American milieu. It charts its course from oppression through protest to liberation. It acts as a weapon for the Afro-American people which helps them to survive through this medium by protesting against the atrocities committed on them. Hence, Richard A. Long and Eugenia W. Collier in *Afro-American Life Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* say that it is a literature of protest and a cry of redress. According to David L. Dudley black writers have reacted to realities of African American history since eighteenth century such as minority status in a white dominated nation, chattel slavery until the civil war, and ongoing economic and social repression. He correctly observes the fact that in the works produced by Afro-American writers there is an assertion of their humanity. This involves the exploration of the difficulties of realizing the positive sense of the self in a society so often predisposed to obliterating it, protest racism and oppression as well as expression of longing for the emotional, economic, and legal security promised by the constitution and the “American Dream”.

There should be a desegregation of America’s cultural heritage. Hence, Ralph Ellison truly observes that to neglect the shaping effect of “the Negro’s presence” upon mainstream culture is to misrepresent American identity as the black American presence forms an ethnically dynamic American cultural heritage. William Wells Brown’s *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847), Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1901), and Malcolm X as well as Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) try to combat racism and oppression in their own different ways and try to establish a unique black identity. In this tradition, even one who minimizes his blackness and writes from a Euro-American perspective is responding in his own way to his experience as a black person. But Afro-American life writing or even Afro-American literature should not be viewed only as a reaction to racism and oppression. This view proves to be very limiting in scope as the tradition also serves to give a thorough insight into the uniqueness of its culture and its life. These three texts located in different periods in the tradition of African American life writing explore

different facets of the Afro-American existence and cater to different purposes across a temporal and a spatial dimension through different ways.

The texts are rooted in Postcolonial Literature meaning literature that has been produced during the Postcolonial era in Postcolonial societies. The term "Postcolonial Era" indicates a period that is after the "Colonial Era" when the colonies had received independence from the colonial powers and became nations in their own rights. The Postcolonial era had an unconscious archive of ideas that is diametrically opposite to the unconscious archive of ideas of the Colonial period in terms of voicing and championing the rights of the voiceless. The texts are studied through the lens of Postcolonialism which is a critical theory that deals with oppression on different grounds such as race, class, caste, gender, species, genetics, and artificial intelligence and its purpose is to restore the rights of the dispossessed, displaced, marginalized, exploited, oppressed, and uprooted. The aim of Postcolonialism is to counteract the see-saw relationship between the master and the slave so that the slave is at a higher concentration of power and the master is at the lower concentration of power thereby changing the power dynamics. The subversion of the see-saw relationship is the basis of all the three texts.

William Wells Brown's Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave (1847):

The texts rooted in the tradition of Afro-American Literature form a trajectory that shows the development charted out in this tradition from the era of chattel slavery to an era of growth, development, and emancipation. William Wells Brown's narrative belongs to the eminent tradition of slave narratives which became the precursor to Afro-American life writing. Slave narratives established many themes intrinsic to subsequent African American life writing. William Wells Brown's narrative became the precursor to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and all of them belong to the category of conversion narratives as they present the rags to riches or failure to success models as their themes. Postcolonialism has a preoccupation with race, language, gender, identity, class, and power. The text *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* is a text dedicated to a friendly antislavery white known as Wells Brown who had helped Brown in his flight to freedom. Hence, it serves the cause of the antislavery or abolitionist movement which was in its full tempo at that time to end the slavery. It is also evident from his biography as it is known that in 1843, he became a lecturer for the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society, a branch of the Garrisonian American Anti-Slavery Society. This slave narrative depicts the life of William W. Brown as a subject born in slavery suffering from all the wrongs and deprivation which are incident to his condition and then finally his difficult flight to freedom. Therefore, Robert Burns Stepto says that the "Strident moral of the former slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing and above all remembering his ordeal in bondage is the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative" (Stepto 3). Race may be defined to describe a group of people who share physical characteristics such as skin color and facial features, social identities, cultural identities, and ancestral backgrounds. Race forms a viable ground for oppression as in this case William W. Brown was of the negroid race with black skin color born into chattel slavery that led to his persecution. The postcolonial aspect of this text is the freedom attained from slavery by William W. Brown and his consequent rehabilitation which empowered him to become a lecturer for the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society thereby providing him social mobility in terms of ascension of class and giving him a role in the production of knowledge against racism and slavery. The text has been written in English which shows the adoption of the slave owner's language and its inherent domestication. William W. Brown asserts his black or African American identity by penning the slave narrative which serves as a text embedded in abolitionist propaganda.

Aporia, ambivalence, indeterminacy, the question of discursive challenge to 'totalizing' concepts are perceived in the text. The aporia or gaps or silences become evident in Brown's narrative, there are other voices which are responsible for authenticating the narrative's tale and strategy and appear in the form of appended documents written by slaveholders and abolitionists alike. The use of authenticating documents by white slaveholders or abolitionists to lend credibility to the slave narratives show the hollowness of the black power. The introductory texts to the tale are a "Letter from Edmund Quincy, Esq" and a "Preface" by J. C. Hathaway which serve the purpose of authenticating the text as during the pre-Civil War era the white validation of a newfound black voice was necessary. This is because the onus of responsibility of emancipating the slaves rested on the white population. Hence, Edmund Quincy in his letter to Brown says that he would be a bold and a vain man if he should try to improve Brown's narrative which is based on the descriptions of what he has seen and suffered. Even J. C. Hathaway in his "Preface" acknowledges the fact that few people have had greater facilities in becoming acquainted with slavery in all its horrible aspects than William W. Brown. These authenticating devices are partially responsible for the narrative's acceptance as historical evidence and for winning more converts to the cause. Homi Bhabha (1949-) contributed the term "Ambivalence" to the Postcolonial theory.

The ambivalence or indeterminacy, that is, any culture possessing the opposite perceptions or dimensions in the text is manifested when Houston A. Baker in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* rightly points out the fact that the voice of the unwritten self once it is subjected to the linguistic codes' literary conventions and audience expectations of a literate population it is no more the authentic voice of black

American slavery. But the black autobiography must accommodate its white milieu if at all its voice is to be heard. Hence, Brown's narrative has been authenticated by the whites and belongs to the category of "elective narrative" where authenticating documents and strategies are appended to the tale and there seems to be no authorial control over these authenticating texts.

The text provides a stark and vivid description of oppression and a scathing indictment of it. Homi Bhabha (1949-) contributed the idea of "Hybridity" to the Postcolonial theory and it refers to the emergence of new cultural forms or a new identity after imbibing different cultural influences or traits or characteristics. Brown begins his narrative by speaking about his birth and parentage and states that his mother was a slave named Elizabeth and his father was a white man named George Higgins. His mother had seven children but all of them had different fathers. Hence, he talks about his ambiguous parentage which is a chief characteristic of many slave narratives as it shows the identity of the black narrator being nullified in the very beginning of his life due to the injustices committed on them by the whites. When he talks about his parentage, he states that as soon as he was born, he was stolen by a man thereby launching a sharp attack on slavery.

Thus, William W. Brown's identity is hybrid as he has imbibed different cultural influences or traits or characteristics. In his narrative, he describes an incident in which a slave named John who was the body servant and carriage driver of Capt. J. B. Brunt and resided near Brown's master, spattered mud on a gentleman named Robert More while driving his master through the city. More to avenge himself bought the slave from the slave's master so that he could tame him. After the purchase he had a ball and chain fastened to his leg and made him drive a yoke of oxen and kept him at hard labor until the iron around his leg was worn into his flesh. He also whipped John regularly three times a week for the first two months so that he could tame him. The narration of this incident as well as many other incidents of this kind shows the narrative to be purely mimetic in which the self is at the periphery instead of at the center of attention looking outside not within transcribing rather than interpreting a set of objective facts. The abolitionists felt that the most useful black auto-biographies would be the ones that forced the ugly facts of "the peculiar institution" to the forefront of a reader's attention. Hence, Brown found a rhetorical mode that would conduct the battle against racism and slavery on grounds other than those already occupied by pro- and anti-slavery polemics.

Homi Bhabha (1949-) contributed the term "Other" to Postcolonialism which refers to the powerless belonging to the margins of the power structure. Brown describes the cruelties and abuses inflicted on slaves, the way he was separated from his mother and sister by the white master, the way in which the slave was subdued by the overseer, Cook, the way in which Cynthia, a slave, became the object of lust for Mr. Walker and was then sold into hopeless bondage by him. By describing these gruesome details of torture, he attacked the system of slavery, called for its destruction, and tried to prove themselves as "men" instead of "phantoms". Therefore, Frances Smith Foster in *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* divides the literary history into two eras – 1760 to 1807 and 1831 to 1865 – and argues that there is an increased concentration on the outrages of slavery and the humanity of blacks in the narratives of the second era. Brown's identity has been problematized as it is seen in the narrative that though his name was William and he was older to his master's nephew, William Moore, but his name underwent a change for the purpose of giving precedence to his name. This illustrates the center periphery politics and Brown's identity is established as that of the "other" and he is the one who must compromise his identity. Later when Brown becomes free, he rejects the identity of Sandford which had been imposed on him by his master and he takes up his old name of William as well as the name of his Quaker friend, Wells Brown, who had helped him in his escape to freedom. This gave him a new identity and therefore he becomes a free man. In the narrative, when Brown was finally making his escape from slavery, and he had lost his way it was the "North Star" which helped him to determine his direction and hence he calls it a slave's true friend. But it also brings to the fore the alienation and isolation of the slave from his surroundings with no friends and relatives to relate to.

Slavery, when it came under pressure from the abolitionists it justified its policies by showing that since Africa was inhabited by spiritually, morally, and intellectually backward and inferior peoples they were not capable of free existence and that they could be guided and protected by their white slave masters. The idea of Africans being "natural" slaves was strongly established and this idea was supported by science and politics. The racist theory is well-refuted and subverted in the narrative when Brown relates the incident that he was supposed to be whipped by the jailer on written orders from his master, Mr. Walker, for spilling wine on some gentlemen, but he comes to know about it beforehand and tricks a fellow negro who is a free man into getting whipped. This incident brings Brown to the conclusion that slavery makes its victims mean thereby subverting the emancipatory role of slavery. The slaves' song which Brown heard from them when they were carried to the South has the only passing reference to Africa which is referred to as the homeland of the slaves. This shows that no image of Africa exists in the slave narrative as the African past of the slaves has been completely nullified. Hence, the narrative does not mention any relation to its African roots as the slaves have been completely brain washed by the whites, they were unaware of their origin.

The postcolonial gesture lies in the attainment of freedom from chattel slavery, emancipation, and empowerment of the former slaves. In the narrative, Brown refers several times to his proposed journey to Canada which symbolizes freedom for him, and he attempts to escape from slavery along with his mother, but they are caught and are taken back in chains. After this incident his mother was sent to New Orleans after being in jail for some time and in Brown's words the purpose of her going away to an unknown place is to die on a cotton, sugar, or rice plantation. He never again met his mother after her departure to New Orleans, but she had urged him to make his escape. He is successful in his plan the next time when he tries to make his escape. Brown considers Elijah P. Lovejoy to be the best master he has had since under him he acquired a little bit of learning. This learning helped him later to keep himself informed regarding the developments of anti-slavery movement through anti-slavery newspapers when he was in Cleveland, Ohio after his escape from slavery. Postcolonialism advocates the reworking of the colonial art forms such as novels, autobiographies or life writings or else slave narratives are primarily western art forms that originated in Europe. Initially, the autobiographies were in the form of confessions. The first autobiography was *Confessions* written by Augustine of Hippo in 397-400 CE. The form has been domesticated to subvert the dominant power structure to make way for the oppressed, exploited, and the marginalized in the society. Hence, William L. Andrews correctly observes the fact that in the slave narrative the quest is toward freedom from physical bondage and the enlightenment that literacy can offer to the restricted self-social consciousness of the slave. Postcolonialism signifies the appropriation of the master's language, its domestication and then using it for championing the rights of the slaves. The slave narrative, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, has been written in English that is the language of the master which has been appropriated to champion the rights of the slaves or the ex-slaves.

Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901)

Postcolonialism focusses on the foregrounding of the notion of nation or nationhood. Thus, the postcolonial text, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* does not mention any relation of the African to his/her roots. According to Wilson Jeremiah Moses this is so because Washington wanted to portray the black people of the South as quintessential Americans, a "New People" on the American soil, having no history, language, or culture other than that which was American. He did this so that the black people would be ideal Americans and would not experience any conflict between Old World loyalties and American interests. This text was written in the post-Civil War period after slavery had been abolished. It is placed across a temporal dimension during the "Era of Reconstruction" in the United States of America and focusses on the growth and development of Afro-Americans who are members of the nation, that is, U.S.A. The severing of the African roots is to emphasize upon the fact that the Afro-Americans are members of the new nation, and the nation can progress when the Afro-American community progresses along with the white community of the nation. Lynn A. Casmier – Paz finds the text to be somewhat fragmentary and aphoristic. The postcolonial text follows the same trajectory of growth, development, and progress for the Afro-Americans from the era of chattel slavery thereby projecting the notion of nationhood. Thus, the narrative reveals Washington's life as a steady march of progress from his childhood days of slavery to hard physical labor after the Civil War. This rehabilitation and empowerment of Booker T. Washington and the people of his community subvert the classic postcolonial see-saw master slave relationship as seen in power dynamics.

"Self-determination" is an idea that is associated with Postcolonialism. It means subversion of cultural hegemony of the powerful as well as questioning their supposed authority and superiority. "Self-determination" may be cultural and/or political. The story of *Up from Slavery* begins with his successful higher education and ends with his status as educator and spokesperson for his people. *Up from Slavery* represents Washington's philosophy as well as his vision of future for African Americans in the South that exhibits his cultural and political self-determination. Booker T. Washington's rise as an educator and spokesperson for his people is not only a way for his and his community's self-determination but also involves the assertion of his black identity in an American milieu.

The postcolonial act of authenticating one's own text indicates championing of cultural integrity of the Afro-Americans as their culture had been sidelined, suppressed, and openly denigrated in favor of elevating the social and cultural preferences of the whites in America. It also provides agency to the subject, that is, Booker T. Washington in foregrounding and asserting his undiluted black or Afro-American identity through the text. *Up from Slavery* has a few authenticating texts outside its tale. There is a short "Preface" and a dedication written by Washington but not by an editor, publisher, or white guarantor sympathetic to Washington's plight or cause. These texts are not merely written but controlled by Washington. In the "Preface", Washington acknowledges the fact that his aim is to tell a simple, straightforward story of his life without any kind of embellishment. He also acknowledges the fact that he took assistance of Max Bennet Thrasher in accomplishing the task. In the dedication, Washington dedicates this work to his wife, Margaret James Washington and to his brother, John. H. Washington, as their patience, fidelity and hard work made the work at Tuskegee successful which was the sole aim of his life. These authenticating texts become the vehicle for introducing certain goals, rhetorical strategies, and authorial postures which Washington pursues throughout

the central text of *Up from Slavery*. Hence, Robert B. Stepto correctly observes that *Up from Slavery* is an “integrated narrative” as the various authenticating texts are controlled and manipulated by the author and very few of the texts appear outside the author’s tale.

Postcolonialism advocates subversion of Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism is subverted in this text as the fact is that Washington controls and manipulates the authenticating texts and establishes his authorial control over these authenticating texts unlike William Wells Brown who has no authorial control over the authenticating texts appended to his tale. It is a worthwhile achievement that a black voice is accepted without white validation. This is so because firstly Washington is writing in the post-Civil War era when slavery had been abolished. Stephen Butterfield calls this era of black autobiography the “Period of Search” as there was an advent of new consciousness and sense of identity among black autobiographers. Postcolonialism advocates “Ambivalence” or accommodation of opposite perceptions or dimensions in the “Other” or the powerless. *Up from Slavery* takes up a shrewdly pragmatic tone of acceptance towards racial divisions, emphasizes on cooperation with Southern whites, minimizes black suffering and sturdily reiterates white, Christian values. Postcolonialism also foregrounds aporia, gaps, indeterminacy, and ambivalence. In his text, he implicitly suggests that the black race is primitive and needs much help before it can be equivalent to the whites. This shows that Washington like William Wells Brown too takes the white milieu into consideration so that his voice is heard and so that he as well as the other black Americans can assert their identity by gaining equality with the whites. Washington adopted a diplomatic attitude towards the whites so that he could gain funds from them to run the Tuskegee Institute which he believed would put the blacks on the road to progress and because he knew that his leadership of the black community largely depended on his recognition by whites as the black leader. Hence, the text has a didactic intent and Washington through his ideology wants to show the black Americans their way of upliftment. Thus, the ambivalence in the text is projected in terms of foregrounding the overarching aim of the text in terms of rehabilitation of the blacks but by resorting to conciliatory politics with the whites. “Hybridity” in Postcolonialism is seen or perceived as a confluence of cultural influences in an individual placed in a multicultural situation. Booker T. Washington is of the opinion that civil rights will come when black Americans learn trades, save money, buy land, and make themselves economically indispensable to their communities. Thus, the Afro-Americans adopted the cultural and professional trends of the white Americans and cooperated with them to attain social mobility thereby becoming hybrid individuals.

Postcolonialism aims at asserting the identity of the oppressed and the marginalized in a society or culture. Washington like William Wells Brown begins his narrative by giving an account of his parentage. He states that his mother was a slave, and he knew nothing about his father except that he was a white man. This bit of information was gathered by him from the reports he heard to the effect. The account of his parentage is like that of Brown’s. Washington states that when he was in school as a small boy he was once asked his name. Washington on the spur of the moment added “Washington” to the rest of his name. This incident shows that Washington took on a new identity after freedom from slavery. Hence, his case is like that of Brown’s. Washington says that he had no knowledge of his ancestry which is again like Brown’s case and Washington like Brown had no claim to an identity. Postcolonialism vividly describes the oppression and the dehumanization of the oppressed. Washington states that when his mother was sold into slavery her addition to the family attracted as much attention as the purchase of a new horse or cow. This stresses the dehumanized condition of the slaves. At the same time, he minimizes the suffering of the blacks when he states in his autobiography that the most trying ordeal for him in slavery was the wearing of a flax shirt. He even launches scathing attacks on the Klu Klux Klan and lynch mobs as he states in his autobiography that he witnessed an open battle between them and the colored people. This battle left a deep impression on his mind of their cruelty. Hence, he says that the Klu Klux Klan period was the darkest period of the Reconstruction days. But on the other hand, he accepted racial divisions regarding labor and education which branded his approach as an “accommodationist” one.

The subversion of Eurocentrism is implicit here as the main thrust of Booker T. Washington’s autobiography was to advocate his philosophy of upliftment and the establishment of the Tuskegee Institute on the ideals of industry, self-help, thrift, genteel manners, and Christian morality. Postcolonialism advocates “Mimicry” that refers to the alien and distorted ways adopted by the marginalized in a society or a culture either by choice or under duress and repeat the ways and discourse to subvert the power of the powerful in the very same society or culture by getting rehabilitated and attaining upliftment as well as social mobility. Marion Berghahn in *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* states that the racist doctrines made technological progress based on the decisive criterion of ethnic superiority so that the Western civilization could be placed at the top of the racial hierarchy and the black as well as other non-European races were branded as being primitive and inferior as they had not achieved technical progress. This view becomes the basis of mimicry in *Up from Slavery*, so Washington accepts this ideology although in his autobiography he criticizes the colored people during the Reconstruction period for their desire to achieve Greek and Latin learning and to hold office. Therefore, Washington in his “Atlanta Exposition Address” states that no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem and that one should begin at the bottom of the

life rather than at the top. He made this principle the core of his upliftment philosophy as he felt that the acquisition of improved farming and industrial skill would bring about economic progress and would make them economically indispensable which would provide further help in racial advancement. And this would ultimately help them attain equality with the whites and they would also achieve their civil rights.

In *Up from Slavery*, he states that slavery with all its attendant evils had made the slaves fit for labor and industry. So, when freedom came since the slaves had learnt certain handicrafts and were used to labor, they were able to realize the ideals of self-help and self-reliance without much difficulty which helped them in the long run. One such person was Mr. Adams whom Washington met. He was a mechanic and he had learnt the trades of shoemaking, harness making and tin smithing during his days of slavery. He had also learnt to read and write when he was a slave. He was impressed by Adam's unusual power of mind which he derived from his training during his days of slavery as he was able to help him with valuable advice and judgement on serious matters. Hence, Washington's autobiography considers the slave's experience as a "school" that trained blacks for their important role in rebuilding the South.

Washington through his narrative, stresses the importance of thrift in his philosophy. He states that he had to struggle hard to get an education. Washington took up a job in Mr. and Mrs. Ruffner's house so that he could study in the Hampton Institute. There he also learnt his lessons in cleanliness, promptness, honesty, and frankness. The small amount of money he earned at Mrs. Ruffner's was almost consumed by his stepfather and other family members but his brother, John, provided him money so that he could embark on his journey to Hampton. On his way to Hampton when he reached Richmond, Virginia he had no money left so he took up a job of unloading ships. After working there for a while and saving money he was finally able to reach the Hampton Institute for education. While he was studying in the Hampton Institute, he had a single pair of socks which he wore till they became soiled and then he would wash them at night and put them by the fire so that he could wear them the next day. He always led a frugal life. Hence, Washington stresses on thrift. Washington in his autobiography acknowledges the fact that life at Hampton Institute was a constant revelation to him and that the discipline of that life took him into a new world. In the Hampton Institute, he learnt his lessons in genteel manners: having meals at regular hours, of eating on a tablecloth, of using a napkin, the use of the bathtub and of the toothbrush, the use of sheets upon the bed and the use of a bath. This early grounding in genteel manners inculcates a sense of personal hygiene in him which he preaches to his black brethren.

One important aspect of mimicry is to adopt the religion of the superior race in addition to its culture. The religion of Christianity becomes a potent force in developing the Afro-Americans by foregrounding a model code of conduct. Washington's stress on Christian morality can be attributed to the fact that for him Christianity is both a spiritual equalizer as well as a moral force in terms of which the unvalued black was able to set and assert a personal valuation. He felt that Christianity seemed to offer equality with the whites because Christianity as a religion changed the African Americans from within rather than from without. It helped them to attain those qualities that would make them socially mobile and help them to ascend the social hierarchy.

Wilson Jeremiah Moses states that Washington described encountering a this-worldly, materialistic, and utilitarian view of religion among the slaves. It is true because Washington does develop a practical attitude towards religion early in life as he recounts in his autobiography, he found double meanings in the lyrics of "Negro Spirituals" as before the war the blacks explained to their masters that their lyrical references to freedom represented their desire to escape from sin. But after the war their references to freedom of the body in this world became less guarded. Washington's preference for the gospel of work and duty to that of comfort and complacency can be attributed to the influences of two puritanical characters namely Miss Mary F. Mackie, the head teacher at Hampton Institute, and General Samuel C. Armstrong, the institution's founder. In *Up from Slavery*, Washington acknowledges their valuable influence upon him, and he idolized General Armstrong by considering him to be a type of the Christ like body of men and women who helped in the upliftment of the black masses. Washington was of the view that religion should be made a part of daily work, and the forces of pietism and morality should reinforce the ethics of work, cleanliness, and thrift. And this in turn would strengthen the individual's capacity for Christian perseverance as a result the increased usefulness of black people would justify their presence in America by the services they rendered. Hence, Wilson Jeremiah Moses correctly observes that Washington's motive was to undermine the other worldly religion of the plantation and replace it with the ethic of achievement.

Postcolonialism involves the reworking of the colonial art forms such as autobiographies or life writings. Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* was an autobiography which was used to chart the path of progress for the blacks although the autobiographical form was originally western but it was used to ameliorate the conditions of the blacks. Peter Carafiol has found Washington's narrative like Horatio Alger's fiction and like Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. It is true because these texts present the American success myth of rags

to riches. The central theme of these texts is that regard for truth and honest dealing brings prosperity. Hence, there is a “complete conversion of American religious idealism into a materialistic formula for success” (Moses 90).

Cultural integrity of the marginalized is emphasized in *Up from Slavery*. The culture of the Afro-Americans is an amalgamation of white and black cultural values, and this combination is essential for the growth of the Afro-American community in a predominantly white society. The values of the whites are accommodated in an Afro-American value system otherwise mutual progress will be hindered. The Washington in his “Atlanta Exposition Address” assured the loyalty of his race to the whites and he stressed the fact that if any need came up the black race would again be ready to serve the whites. He emphasized the fact that in all things which were purely social they were as separate as the fingers but were one as the hand in matters of mutual progress. Hence, he advocated integration acceptance, mutual dependence and mutual progress of the blacks and whites as he was of the view that cooperation would bring about growth and development. W. E. B. Du Bois has severely criticized the texts’ “accommodationist” philosophy. But Cary D. Wintz in *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* states that “In the Atlanta speech, beneath the call for patience and ambiguous reference to justice, progress and upliftment, Washington indicated that ultimately he expected blacks, through moderate means, to gain their full and unrestricted political and social rights” (Wintz 38). This is true because Washington has stressed the same fact many a times in his autobiography. Washington’s narrative unlike Brown’s narrative is a spiritual autobiography which places “self” at the center. Louis R. Harlan states the fact that Washington’s ideas of self-help and racial solidarity still have currency in the black community.

The appropriation of the language is evident in this autobiography as it is written in English, the language of the whites.

Malcolm X and Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965):

The Autobiography of Malcolm X written in collaboration with Alex Haley like Washington’s narrative is a spiritual autobiography. It traces growth of the autobiographical self. This autobiography is the life story of one of the most remarkable leaders of the civil rights movement in the United States of America. Postcolonialism recognizes race and class as important grounds of oppression along with gender. It describes the nature of oppression on the marginalized and the dispossessed in a particular society and the subsequent restoration of their rights after a long-drawn struggle. The autobiography was written at a time when African American life’s profound change was resulting from school desegregation, gradual erosion of Jim Crow laws in the South, advances achieved through legal efforts of the N.A.A.C.P. and through non-violent social protest organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. While the other segment of the black community became radicalized as evidenced by the rise of the groups such as the Nation of Islam. Stephen Butterfield in *Black Autobiography in America* calls this era “the Period of Rebirth” and states that in this era there was a renewed sense of black pride and a direct political struggle. This autobiography like Brown’s narrative called attention to the terrible conditions under which millions of African Americans lived not in legalized slavery but in the economic and social bondage of America’s southern towns and northern inner cities. Postcolonialism emphasizes on the assertion of identity of the oppressed and the marginalized in a mainstream society. Joseph T. Skerret, Jr. states that this autobiography is structured around Malcolm’s protean personality and changing identity which is marked by the changes in his name thereby denoting the evolution of his independent self and identity.

Postcolonialism foregrounds self-determination. Malcolm X’s self-determination happens over a period of time which is manifested in his violent rebellion against the whites in the American society. It is true because the autobiography details the story of Malcolm’s decline from a poor orphan to a criminal and drug addict and his subsequent rise from a prison autodidact to a sectarian revolutionary to a religious visionary. Postcolonialism emphasizes upon the assertion of the identity of the oppressed or the marginalized in a particular society or culture. According to Rebecca Chalmers Barton this autobiography exemplified the concept of black identity as distinct from and morally superior to the corporate white identity that dominated the cultural and socio-political ethos of America. Postcolonialism focusses on reworking of colonial art forms. Autobiographies or life writings are western art forms which have been used by the Afro-Americans to express their lives’ experiences leading to the evolution of the self. This is a multiple or collaborative autobiography in which Malcolm X’s oral performance was stimulated and recorded by Alex Haley. Early on their collaboration, as the text makes clear, Malcolm asserted that the facts contained in the book’s manuscript were ascertained by him. Malcolm being an expert and experienced speaker reduced Alex Haley’s role to that of a secretary and not of an interpreter who might dilute his message to please the white readers. This shows Malcolm having full command over his autobiography. The latter part of the narrative interlards excerpts from Malcolm’s speeches and writings which give him a second and an unquestionably authentic voice in the text. These various modes of life writing are held together by Haley’s construction of Malcolm’s narrative voice. This autobiography like that of Washington’s autobiography presents the theme of secular rags to riches or failure to success models based on Benjamin Franklin tradition and Alger myth.

Postcolonialism is a critical theory that aims at exposing the oppression in a particular society and champion the rights of the voiceless in that society by providing them a voice. Malcolm in his autobiography makes the fact very clear that since he was a black, all his misfortunes had been authored by the white race thereby giving a stark picture of racism and oppression rampant in twentieth century America. Malcolm's father, Earl Little, was brutally murdered and the suspicion rested on white vigilant organizations like Klu Klux Klan and Black Legion; the whites were responsible for his mother's nervous breakdown and the disintegration of their family; in the detention home he met a white couple, Mr. and Mrs. Swerlin, who treated him well but ignored his humanity reducing him to the status of a pet canary; when in school his white teacher had allowed the white students to choose whatever goals they wanted to choose but Malcolm was discouraged despite being a good student just because he was a black. This series of events in his life contributed to his rapid degradation and he nursed severe hatred in his heart for the whites and equated them with the devils. Later, when he planned a burglary and was arrested, he was put behind bars for eight to ten years. In his autobiography, he says that he was sentenced to jail for a long period because he had a white mistress Sophia, who was his partner in crime rather than for his offence of burglary. His redemption began in prison with his exposure to Muhammad's ghetto theology and its Damascene central revelation that white people were a race of devils created for the torment of the black sons and daughters of Allah. Hence, Peter Goldman states that Malcolm's victories were private victories that took place in his world of affairs which most people think of as real.

Malcolm says in his autobiography that his life was a "chronology of changes" – Malcolm Little, Detroit Red, Satan, Malcolm X and El-hajj Malik El Shabazz. In the narrative, Malcolm gets his hair straightened when he was in Boston. The straightening of his hair, going for a white mistress, taking up the life of crime, taking drugs could be interpreted as the rejection of the "African" ego by Afro-American children. Since knowledge about Africa was not acquired by direct experience but was transmitted via the dominant white culture the Afro-Americans encountered the image of Africa which was a negative one. Therefore, the Afro-Americans began to associate evil with black and white with positive characteristics which bred self-hatred in an Afro-American and in turn confirmed the traditional prejudices of black inferiority thereby creating a vicious circle. Hence, Malcolm shows the way in which the white racists made the blacks hate themselves by brain washing them. Malcolm was severely critical of the integrationist middle class blacks in his autobiography because their adaptation of the white cultural values has alienated them from their ethnic roots, and they look down upon the lower strata of black America. Postcolonialism focusses on cultural integrity. In this case, the cultural integrity of the protagonist is preserved by rejecting Christianity which is considered a white man's religion and by adopting a different religion. Malcolm's rejection of Christianity and his conversion to Islam is a meaningful gesture as by rejecting Christianity he rejected the white man's religion and his cultural values. Marion Berghahn states that the polarity of black and white is at the center of the Christian system of symbols and it intensified the already existing sensibility to color. Hence, Malcolm rejects Christianity unlike Washington who embraces Christianity and Christian values.

Postcolonialism advocates the subversion of the see-saw relationship thereby undercutting the established power dynamics between the whites and the blacks where the whites are the perpetrators of atrocities, and the blacks are the recipients of those atrocities. In this autobiography, the conversion of the protagonist amounts to the subversion of the see-saw relationship and it is projected as a part of the power dynamics. After embracing Islam, Malcolm changes his title from Malcolm Little to Malcolm X where "X" symbolizes his unknown African ancestry. Hence, unlike Washington's narrative Malcolm's narrative acknowledges the relationship of Afro-Americans to their African roots which gives them racial pride. In the autobiography, Malcolm talks about the Black Muslims, the sect to which Malcolm belonged, who advocated black supremacy to counteract white supremacy. When Malcolm was in jail Elijah Muhammad taught him his doctrines through letters in which he advocated his theory of black supremacy. He advocated that whites were devils, a cursed race, brought into existence by the mad scientist Mr. Yakub and the total isolation from a white race doomed by its own sinfulness to oblivion was the goal of the Nation of Islam. The concept of an evil race of white devils appealed to the oppressed black people like Malcolm as he could document the evil of the white man from his personal experience. He accepted black racism also due to his hatred and anger for the whites. The concept of black supremacy was as absurd as the concept of white supremacy which was an adaptation of the American Protestant myth identifying the origins of the black race with the curse of Cain or Noah's curse of Canaan. Wilson Jeremiah Moses states that the Black Muslims did not seek acceptance from other Muslims because their chief concern was to conduct a spiritual jihad against white supremacy rather than the authentication of their movement in the eyes of outsiders. The politics behind the theory of black supremacy and the formation of the sect of black Muslims is to give downtrodden black men a psychological lift, the establishment of the racial and political identity of the Afro-Americans in a white America, to glorify their African past and to destroy the myth of inferiority related to Afro-Americans because of their African origin.

The Black Muslims viewed even the black Christians with contempt, and they were not concerned about relations with whites of their own religious persuasions, Malcolm saw that his rage was the potential

liberating force for the retrieval of blacks from what he perceived as the worst crime whites had done on them by teaching them to hate themselves. The autobiography provides evidence to support the fact that Malcolm X's militant separatist black nationalism was rooted in the theory of black supremacy as preached by Elijah Muhammad whom he idolized. In the narrative, Malcolm X describes Elijah Muhammad as the messenger of Allah who had been inspired by Wallace D. Fard, a black man, who was described as "God in person". Malcolm X's black nationalism was derived from the principle of total isolation of the black race from the white race and it resulted in his separatist politics. Washington stressed on integration with the whites while Malcolm stressed on separatist politics. Washington had adopted a moderate tone to propagate his ideology while Malcolm X's tone was that of an extremist.

The autobiography recounts that Malcolm X's popularity with the black masses caused jealousy within Muhammad's inner circle. Malcolm came to know about Muhammad's hypocrisy through Muhammad's secretaries who told Malcolm that Muhammad praised him on his face but criticized him privately. Finally, there was an open break between Malcolm and Nation of Islam. Malcolm's final spiritual transformation followed his "hajj" or pilgrimage to Mecca. In Mecca, he saw hundreds of thousands of pilgrims of all colors worshipping and this again caused a transformation in his soul. He observed that all behaved as brothers, for all are brothers in Islam, a faith which knows no color discrimination. All are one before Allah as Islam advocates universal brotherhood. This ran counter to Mr. Muhammad's teachings as he preached black racism which is as bad as white racism. Hence, Malcolm realizes the truth that it is not color that makes people angels or devils, but it is a person's behavior which decides whether a person is an angel or a devil. But Malcolm did not change his tactics in his continuing attack on the villainy of the white Americans as he thought that white Americans behaved villainously with the black Americans due to their sense of superiority. The text has a didactic intent as Malcolm becomes a model of self-creation which would inspire the black masses. Malcolm X challenged Washington's philosophy by renouncing integration as he thought that it was a further denial of the rights of the black people. He renounced non-violence as he found it to be a newer, subtler form of humiliation before the slave master. He was moved by the degradations of ghetto life and even more by the acquiescence of black men and women in them. Malcolm established his black identity in the world of white supremacy. He became a strong and powerful politician who had strong hold on the black masses. Hence, Ossie Davis states that:

Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And, in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves ... he was and is – a prince – our own black shining Prince! – who didn't hesitate to die, because he loved us so. (218)

Conclusion:

The autobiographical texts respond in their own way to racism and oppression prevalent in America thereby forming a rich tradition of African American life writing. The suppressed voices of the black American writers are coming to the surface to voice their woes. Black American culture forms a subculture within the mainstream American culture and wants to make its presence felt by establishing its identity. An effort has been made to examine the responses of these African Americans under the yoke of racism and oppression from the days of slavery to the modern days. William Wells Brown's narrative written during the ante-bellum era made an appeal to end the evil institution of slavery so that millions of slaves can be freed from their bondage and can attain freedom. Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* tries to guide the African Americans of the post-Civil War era so that they can attain equality with the whites. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* urges the African Americans to establish their own racial and political identity as well as to emphasize their glorious, African past so that they can stand up to racism and oppression. These three texts form a hierarchy as each text tries to cope with the problems and seem to become more complicated as time passes. During the period of slavery, the slaves wanted freedom. In the post-Civil War period, the African Americans wanted equality so that they could share equal status with the whites. In the post-world war era, the African Americans are trying to establish their own racial and political identity and want to live their lives on their own terms but not by adopting white cultural values.

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