



Up From Slavery: A Study of Self, Community and Identity

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Booker T. Washington's hybrid identity as an Afro-American make one assume that his autobiography be aligned with the tradition of Afro-American autobiography whose antecedents can be traced to the tradition of slave-narratives. Generally the testimonial narratives of the blacks before the American Civil War was conspicuous with narrativising the horrors of displacement and exploitation at the hands of the colonial masters. The Afro-American autobiography too as an aesthetic literary form was shaped by the same ethos of truth telling and the need to reclaim a voice previously erased from history. The aestheticized politics of the genre of Afro-American autobiography however fail to determine the established paradigm in which Washington's autobiography may be considered. The latter unlike other Afro-American autobiographies, map the possibilities and the avenues of charting a success story in America through his representative life story, where his blackness becomes contingent and only reaffirm the potentialities of the new historical reality for the blacks in America. As a literary form it is particularly suited to the traditional American self-image: individualistic and optimistic. The underlying motif of individualism intrinsic to the genre testifies to the efficacy of individual action in a society of possibilities. Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography is entrenched in the sentiments and becomes the forerunner to establish a popular pattern characterized by an implicit affirmation of the worth of the individual and of capitalistic success in American and even Afro-American autobiography like Washington's.

Sidonie Smith's suggestion in her essay "Casting Down" that Booker T. Washington is the first well known black Horatio Alger is reflected in John Hope Franklin's introduction to one edition of the autobiography, where he says

By the beginning of the new century, Washington was one of the most powerful men in the United States. Great philanthropists and industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller listened to him courteously and were influenced by his advice. Presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft depended on him for suggestions regarding the resolution of problems involving race. Southern Whites in high places knew that a good word in their behalf by Washington would open doors previously closed to them.

And his autobiography written in 1901 came as aftermath of such a life marked by achievements. The many parallels between Benjamin Franklin's and Washington's success story reaffirm the belief that the latter appropriates the autobiographical form which embodies the America myth of social success. Washington's life story as laid down between the covers of *Up From Slavery* adequately justifies such a criticism. He tells in the simplest, most straight forward terms of his rise from slavery to a position as leader of his people. He begins his life as a slave in Franklin Country, Virginia, is taken by his mother to Malden, West Virginia. After the slaves are freed, works first in the salt mines near Malden, but does manage to go to school. From that meager beginning he determines to go to Hampton Institute in Virginia, where he makes a sufficient impression on Gen. Samuel Armstrong head of the school, to be recommended to go to Alabama "to take charge of what was to be a normal school for the coloured people in the little town of Tuskegee in that state" (p. 52). By dint of hard work, ceaseless diplomacy with the white population of Macon Country and unremitting perseverance in the face of ignorance, poverty, inertia and doubt, he builds Tuskegee from nothing but a dilapidated building of a ruined plantation into Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. The money for the school came primarily from white northern philanthropists, students from the black population of the United States, though largely were from the south. Survival was possible from Washington's carefully orchestrated interdependence between Tuskegees and the dominant southern whites. The climax of Washington's career, as he narrates it, is his speech at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895. That speech not only represents the achievement of an ex-slave addressing a large white southern audience, it also marks Booker T. Washington's emergence as a national leader of his people.

It is no doubt that Washington's self-portraiture gels well with the prototypal hero of the Horatio Alger myth, who is an economic materialist, self-made businessman whose sense of identity is derived from his social usefulness. But Smith's kind of analysis only uncovers single slice of the many layered complexities. *Up From Slavery* demands more attention than banal simplifications as it is also an atypical narrative of a former slave born of Jane, a slave, and an unknown white man. This double consciousness is of particular interest for it forms the paradigm within which his sense of identity is constructed. Before going to the question of how his autobiography is typical of the genre of slave narrative we may do well to know the contents of a typical slave narrative. Ruth Millar and Peter J. Katopes describes it as that which

...record the flight to freedom, they are chronological in structure, episodic and provide little, if any transition. Events are drawn from common experience, incidents that dismay or horrify or repel are frequently recounted with a lack of passion usually associated with literature designed to demonstrate the truth. There

are auction blocks, lashings, escapes and recaptures; there are tears and prayers and exhortations; there are special providences recorded, coincidences, suspicious moments in flight, tricks and outwit captors, all of this presented in a tone that is pervasively sober. If there is a preponderance of gloom, there is also optimism, despair mingles with joy. And the overriding purpose of the narrative is to activate the will of the reader to abolish first the slave trade and finally slavery.

Such vivid description of horrors and degradations coming from personal testimonies of slaves also became instrumental tools for the abolitionists. This kind of overriding concern with the self-according to some critics is the prelude to American Romanticism. Much of the same preoccupation of the antebellum slave narratives witnesses a resurgence in the 1960s in the works such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. These black autobiographers of this era like Angelo Herndon, Du Bois and Richard Wright adapted a militant tone and forged into their narratives the political flame of Black Power. They articulated the concept of blackness as the sine qua non of Afro-American identity which is necessarily distinct from and morally superior to the corporate white identity that dominated the cultural ethos of America. Washington's postbellum slave narrative which failed to foreground the apocalyptic tone was marginalized by Afro-American autobiography criticism of the 1960s and 1970s which celebrated antebellum narrative specially Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* as the epitome of slave narrative. Influential criticisms like Stephen Butterfield's *Black Autobiography in American* stress Washington's unrepresentativeness in recounting the paradigmatic black experience in America that Butterfield considers central to his canon formation. In this type of sidelining there exist a critical bias in favor of a certain type of slave narrative- one that dwells upon the horrors of the writer's past conditions of servitude rather than one that highlights how far the ex-slave has come in his or her pursuit of the American Dream. The allegation being that postbellum slave narratives like Washington's are written by persons obsessed by bourgeois social-climbing who could not tell the whole truth about their past. It is in this context of critical bias that I justify my earlier assertion that *Up From Slavery* is atypical of the genre of Afro-American autobiography.

However unlike Butterfield, Sidonie Smith in *Where I'm Bound : Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* finds place in the major tradition of black American autobiography for a text as apparently atypical as *Up From Slavery*. In fact she outlines a considerable body of black first- person writing in the Washington mode and acknowledges such middle – class success stories that Butterfield dismisses. The concept of marginal and central in this kind of debate brings us to the fundamental question as to how selfhood in the 1845 *Narrative* is deemed as a black contribution to the literature of romantic individualism and anti-institutionalism. The stunningly different treatment of bondage and selfhood in *Up From Slavery* signal a new wave of revisionism in postbellum Afro-American literature. It is in fact a reaction to what later slave autobiographies perceive as romanticized interpretation of the pre-emancipation past. *Up From Slavery* delineates the pragmatic approach to the image of slavery and the idea of the heroic selfhood. Smith's suggestion of the dynamic notion of self evolving out of a complex meaning of freedom and slavery is more relevant of Washington than Butterfield's static notion of selfhood that underline this tradition. Smith's study is particularly relevant to slave narrative of the period 1865- 1920 .

Before coming to the dominant mood of pragmatism that pervades Washington's autobiography, it is important that we trace it to the metaphor of slavery that he has drawn upon. Washington's conception of the historical experience of slavery as a schooling and the associated rigours as instrumental in shaping individual's potential is very telling.

...we must acknowledge that notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery , the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country; who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery , are in a stronger and more hopeful condition , materially , intellectually , morally , and religiously , than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe.(p.20)

As opposed to the antebellum writers, Washington and others compare slavery to a school in which he and his followers received rather than lost, social purpose and from which they graduated not by violence but by socially sanctioned behavior like industry and dutifulness. This kind of approach in turn determines the formal dynamics of his narratives. The facts of his education and actions are transformed by Washington into a personal myth worthy of emulation. His realism entails a premium on deeds than mere rhetoric, "The actual sight of a first – class house that a Negro has built is ten times more potent than pages of discussion about a house that he ought to build, or perhaps could build" (p.19). Action, Washington insists , produces things, discussion, by contrast , produces only more discussion. "Instead of studying books so constantly, how I wish that our schools colleges might learn to study men and things!" (p.30). He means to teach his people that freedom means freedom to labour, not freedom from labour. His vision of education does not denigrate labour. Believing that education for people at the bottom of society has to begin at the bottom, Washington wants the body and hands cleaned and disciplined before he cultivates the head. Foreign languages and higher education does not get priority in his scheme whereas practical education is what contributes to the definition of an individual.

These larger issues give the text the semblance of a cultural artifact and the text in reconstituting itself as a great collective and class discourse becomes more than an individual utterance. It is to be noted that the widening horizons highlight the socio-political import of the text. Here Frederic Jameson's argument in the *Political Unconscious* can be rightly co-opted for our purpose. In "Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act" Jameson argues that all texts are to be interpreted as having an "ideology of form". The form then does not disregard history or accede to the notion that extrinsic to form there is "some inertly social content" that the author labours to represent in the text. Jameson stresses that the formal and stylistic patterns within is to be seen as symbolic enactment of the social within the formal aesthetics.

The point made by Jameson when applied to the text of *Up From Slavery* contests earlier criticism made by Butterfield that it is apolitical. William Andrews in "A Poetics of Afro- American Autobiography" endorses Jameson's view in arguing that black autobiography including Washington's should be perceived as

a symbolic act that is both constative i.e. refers to something extrinsic and performative i.e. it enact something by its very existence as a text. Such a view accords well when we turn to the discursive strategies that Washington practices through the autobiographical act. Huston A. Baker Jr. counters the criticism of *Up From Slavery* as the reenactment of the Horatio Alger myth by emphasizing on the self-conscious designs in his easy entitled “Mastery of Forms”. Here he proposes the notion of mask as form and also as space of habitation for the deep seated denial of the indisputable humanity of Washington as a black descendant. Under the veil of the mask he strategically employs stereotypes and tones to keep in tune with the mainstream audience. As when he calls his mother as the “chicken stealing darky” and remarks,

One of my earliest recollections is that of my mother cooking a chicken late at night and awakening her children for the purpose of feeding them. How or where she got it I do not know. I presume, however, it was procured from our owner's farm (p. 31).

From the mother as chicken thief to a condemnation and mockery of Afro-American professional in the chapter on ‘Reconstruction’. Washington's appropriation of the stereotypes of the black as diabolic, servile are often the same representations that congeal images of black people in the literature of white writers. The Negro writer's abject situation and reminiscence of his mother's act that “She is simply a victim of slavery” (p.31) is actually a manipulation of his craft which apparently do not conform to the ethos of the slave narrative, yet makes possible to find a voice on behalf of his community to articulate the untold saga of victimization and slavery that his race endured. The sense of an emergent inclusive self that aspires to accommodate the ‘other’ is a sign of intense indoctrination of Christian preaching that subscribe the dissolution of the self as a pre-requisite to finding the ‘essential’ self. Washington's drama of selfhood seems to be prompted by the same impulse.

In order to be successful in any kind of undertaking I think the main thing is for one to grow to the point where he completely forgets himself, that is, to lose himself in a great cause. (p.18)

This kind of self – effacement in embracing of social causes is also a mask to get him political mileage. So then the “self” which is aggrandized in all autobiography is camouflaged as a ‘voice’ in Washington which is covertly resistant.

Sidonie Smith however critiques Washington's mode of self-representation. She views his self-annihilation in Christian ethics as rejection of his black identity. Even in the ritual of naming, the otherwise liberating strategy once again entraps him within the dominant culture and he conforms by naming “Washington” whereby he hopes to create an ideal identity which embodies his personal vision of himself. His attempt to secure education at Hampton Institute which he describes as “the promised land” is an “effort to fit” (p.51). His urgings about the “gospel of wealth” and the “toothbrush” as the synecdoche of civilization is an attempt of his part to create an identity capable of assimilation within the large white milieu. The source

of this complexity, no doubt, is being a black in white America, with the attendant dualism and ambivalence that black people feel. So the assumption of the mask in many cases may be a form of oppression that forces the black self to deny its authentic impulses. James M Cox adequately summarizes Washington's position in *Autobiography and Washington* in his remark:

...that Booker Washington, if not all black, defines himself as black, not white. He determines to remain in a society which will aggressively see him as black not white. If the name he takes is white and the civilization which he is set on acquiring for himself and his people is white, these are to be acquisitions, not being; they are properly, not identity. They constitute a self to be moved and built, both in Washington's life and his book. (Cox, p.259)

In exploring the ideological pattern in *Up From Slavery* two concepts from James Olney's study of the meaning of autobiography in *Metaphors of Self* may prove useful. For Olney the best way to view in autobiography is "to see it in relation to the vital impulse to order that always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines both the nature and the form of what he creates" (p. 3). This ordering or reconstruction through writing takes the form of single metaphor in autobiography simplex and double metaphor in autobiography complex. Now if we limit our analysis of *Up From Slavery* to the ideology or politics of Washington, we merely make the text reductive. His conservative position is a point of view belonging to him but definitely not identical with his whole self. He undoubtedly assumes the tone of the first person narrative voice but to the purpose to signify the collective. He identifies his 'logos' as the black people in America and so completely submerges his individual self that the narrative discounts any unique experience of the author. But as James Olney points out the text's methodology operates also within a larger philosophical framework and the ideology cannot always overshadow the ideologue. And this is preciously true of Washington. His inability to gain objective distance is symptomatic of his coming to term with the "becoming self". His efforts to emerge as the "speaking subject" by inscribing the black voice within the mold of the autobiographical act unleashes private moments of fear and doubt. When as a slave boy he brings food home late from the mill and fears he brings food home late from the mill and fears that in the dark he would be caught and ears cut off by deserting soldiers, or even when he names himself, his anxiety at not having a name as the teacher begins to call the roll, his fear at provoking hostility while dining with two white ladies in a train to Alabama and more do not diminish with Washington's discussions his profound fear of public speaking- the fear that some single member of the audience may walk out, the growing anxiety of eating a multicourse dinner with the knowledge of having to give an after – dinner speech. Here the 'self' in question unlike the confessional autobiography is involved less with ontological questions as much as with accommodations strategies. To conclude the performative aspect of Washington's autobiography is conspicuous in devoting three full chapters to professed anti literary thesis is profound in performing race, writing and difference, and the last one particularly Washington transforms from a liability into an asset:

With few exceptions, the Negro youth must work harder and must perform his task even better than a white youth in order to secure recognition. But out of the hard and unusual struggle which he is compelled to pass, he gets a strength, a confidence, that one misses whose pathway is comparatively smooth by reason of birth and race. (p. 23)

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