

Article

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The Narrative of Interned Entity: *Twelve Years a Slave*



“ I want to live”

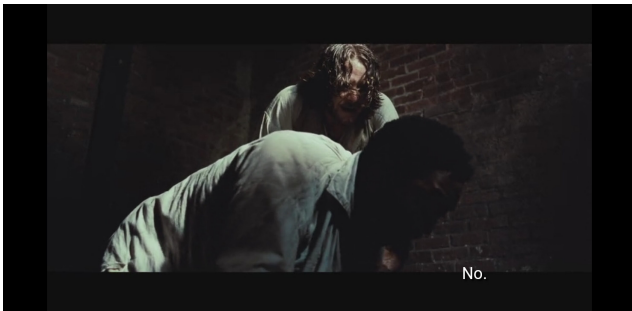
--Solomon Northup in *Twelve Years a Slave*

The intensest ignominy to a human soul is that when the emotional and biological nerves of a man is shattered to such a point of fragmented anguish that it becomes intrigue dense to keep the lamp burning inside the mortal walls, being compelled to sustain that atrocity on existence. A recorded black period of human civilization, of genocide of the pre civil war America, the horribly tragic history of humiliation on the honour of inbuilt born free beings, that was marketed in the Central Louisiana has been projected alive through the indelible odyssey of the afro- American violinist, in the prolonged pain of his captive journey as the sun of the scenes - Solomon Northup, in the biographical drama film “*Twelve Years a Slave*”, and the indomitable spirit of human soul to inqilab his life ritual – “*I am free*”

“*Twelve Years a Slave*” was filmed in 2013, but its history dates back to 1841, when

the most flagrant of all historical crimes - auction of the blacks - was a sadistic religion for the concerned whites. The themes of racism, economic structure, negligence towards the compelled oppressed community and sexism are exposed in random sequence throughout the film. Mothers were separated from their tiny tots (as mentioned in the film too), no tears could touch those traders, they were displayed total nude like that of merchandises, they were labelled with verbal price tags, they were treated with ultimate humiliation and incredible physical and mental torture, were traded as sex objects. Their very entity as free humans were crushed into pieces by their white owners. This black history of civilization is recorded by Solomon Northup, an American abolitionist, a brave heart, who wanted to live and not to sustain life, in his slave memoir - *Twelve Years a Slave* In 1841, which is adapted in this visual sharing the same title, to state rather aptly, as a biopic by Steve McQueen . Death was evident if they said that were academically even a little aware of, and most relatable, if they said that they were “free”. The day when Solomon Northup

found himself tied in chains and discovered himself in a cell, he understood that he is, in fact, cheated by those two Americans who brought him from Saratoga Springs, upstate New York, for a two-week tour in Washington with their theatrical company. But Solomon is secretly abducted, drugged and sold into slavery, cladding cruelty, personified by a malevolent slave owner. Its fact that “*Twelve Years a Slave*” is not the first or the only movie on slavery, but it is so penetrating and true to life in its depiction of that intense human tragedy that it can make the audience feel that dark malignancies of that ostensible civilised history and it can make the audience speak - “*no tragedy can ever be worst than this.*” Celebrated movies like *Django Unchained* by Quentin Tarantino(2013), and Victor Fleming’s *Gone with the Wind*(1939) too depicted the theme of racism in celluloid, but in comparison to the simultaneously flashed optimism of *Twelve Years a Slave*, exulting human spirit, they were depressive and dark. *Gone with the Wind* was dropped off from HBO streaming service for over depiction of slavery but is restored now with disclaimer saying film ‘*denies the horror of slavery.*’ (1)



This Steve McQueen visual is excellent in one word, except being a little lengthy in its mid episode, but it did never break the integrity. The protagonist, Chiwetel Ejiofor, as Solomon Northup, himself is the film. Nowhere in the entire narrative does he say to look at him as an actor, but he rules the audience’s emotion and conscience, pouring his life out. The film is not only a cathartic experience of the holocaust of racist pathology, but a very well constructed visual, an inside out anatomy, that leaves even the audience too in a chaos where they might feel it unfeasible to relate with that precise sadism, marked by most of Northup’s malignant owners. Here, Solomon’s is not a

projected character, but a presented chapter of history to outsource the folks about that extreme bias of a group of men towards their home fraternity.



In the initial scenes, when inside a cell, Solomon Northup wakes up chained to the walls and tells the slave trader of his being a free man. He is asked for his papers what he could not produce. The trader named Theophilus Freeman gives Northup the identity of “*Plat*”, a runaway slave from Georgia, repeatedly asserts it and goes on pounding him brutally, tries to make him accept that he is a slave, but in spite of such callous torture, Solomon constantly went on saying, “*No*”, he is a free man from Saratoga, he is not a slave. This scene is unbearable and despotic but was too real. That specific, uncut scene, displaying 87 seconds of beating is unbearable, but real, it displayed how in an irony of fate, a free man was destined to be a slave and someone’s paid commodity. Solomon’s happy life was shattered into a pathetic, uncertain journey. His tattered, blood ridden shirt was snatched away by them, he did not want to give it, as it was a gift from his wife, a symbol of love and memory of his *free, happy family days*, but those traders, who could separate mothers from their children so unsusceptible, were obviously expected not to possess that next level of sensitivity to understand such minute emotions .

The third act of the film starts when Solomon is sold to the Ford plantation. He was the only master who had treated his slaves as humans. This episode, spanning 22 minutes is the time when Solomon started humanizing his existing state of life, started thinking about optimism, when he was gifted a violin by Ford. He started pouring out his pain through it, as he was a free man, an artist, and music

again started nurturing his dry roots of hope. He said, *“Fortunate was the slave who came to his possession. Were all men such as he, slavery would be deprived of more than half its bitterness.”* Northrup also wrote of Ford, *“There never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford.”* ²



Northrup had immense love for fatherly Ford. Being a devotee Christian, he always humanized his people, not slaves. It is quoted:

“The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his father’s before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different.” ³

But his passive paternalism did not let him exercise his humanity, bypassing the cruelty of the other co masters and so his companion, the plantation carpenter John Tibetas, a cruel slave owner, practised all his sadism and cruelty on this freeman and once almost hanged him for countering his treachery. He was struggling on his tiptoes, the slave world around him was going on in its normal course, because the life of a slave was to be bought and sold, not honoured, even their fellowman did not dare to rescue another ones’ death. Since Ford could not help Northrup, he sold him to another master- Epps (Mr. Fassbender), to save his life from Tibetas and his savage group.

With a sharp contrast to Ford, Epps was equally brutal and treacherous. His character portrayal was so dominating that sometimes the audience feel his coagulated intensity to be indubitably flamboyant, overshadowing Northrup. His brutal sexual exploitation towards a skilled cotton picker, Patsey (Lupita Nyong’o), whom he regularly raped. Her destiny did not end there, she was severely punished, her psychological state, the honour of her existence was shattered even by Mrs. Epps. Northrup wrote in his memoir,

“The pride of the haughty woman was aroused; the blood of the fiery southern boiled at the sight of Patsey, and nothing less than trampling out the life of the helpless bondwoman would satisfy her.” ⁴



Patsey is often rewarded as ‘the hero’ of the film. So movingly she possesses a sense of sensibility and dignity in spite of the malignant hostility prevailing all around in Twelve Years a Slave that it has remained as another dimension of exhibiting how a person is left what she or he is not, so pathetically, crushed by time and situation. Slaves were very expensive live stocks, but the difference was that they were not treated as humans and only as recyclable objects. Patsey was once denied of a piece of soap by Mrs. Epps, and so she went to a nearby plantation to have one, but she was caught by Epps and he became so ferocious that he ordered Northrup to beat her. She was beaten nearly to death by helpless Northrup, and after that, out of anguish and rage, he broke his violin.

Patsey repeatedly kept on saying Epps that she wanted only a piece of soap to keep herself clean, she does much more work than a man does in the plantation and still he is not satisfied, but Epps intentionally went on abusing her as a ‘liar’. She firmly protested,

“I don't lie, even if you kill me, I'll stick to that.”



“What will become of me?”, the tearful question of Patsey at the freedom of Solomon, was the question of thousands of slaves that was never answered, neither in the movie, nor in history. The longest episode with the Epps spans for 67 minutes, leaving the spectators in a blistering trauma.

Ray of hope eventually knocked Solomon's door when Epps leased the slave group to another master. Might be due to the flow of some kind of balanced ratio of natural justice, the world has still remained to be a sustainable place to exist and strive for the ones who want to live. On the contrary to many of the ruthless white slave masters, some appeared to be kind enough to honour Northups' sense of freedom, as his unexpected acquisition with the Canadian abolitionist (Brad Pitt) altered his life. The tragic part is that most of the slaves practically did not struggle to come out of that vicious circle, they accepted their horrible plight to be their set, inbuilt, destiny. So, when most often the question arises that while Northup was a representative of entire town of slaves, what did his Individual freedom signify? Selfishness? Of course not, it certainly signifies his inner faith that he has always been a free man and he will have to be free. Not even for a single fraction of time, he did accept his slavery as destiny and continuously struggled to have back his honour as a free man, what his other companions did not.

The film is sometimes alleged of cherishing spoilers of much long shots, but the cinematographer, Sean Bobbitt, who was associated with Steve McQueen, having filmed the director's previous works *Shame* and *Hunger*, said that the extreme wide long shots, capturing the plantation lives of the slaves, their captive, mastered emotions by the slave traders are not spoilers and much creditable for portraying the true to life scenes. The shots capturing the hanging of Solomon, the close shots, exploiting the situations like mirrors (the whipping, the night interrogation, his writing letter with blueberry extract at night, intimate, emotional conversation with Patsey, the tearing of his letter)the family reunion) are the masterstrokes that have made the film a blistering elegy of *“kidnapped shadows”* and left the audience into tears, proving his skill as a war photographer.

*The cinematography of 12 Years a Slave blends contemporary techniques with a historical story, and in that element it's quite unique. The film opens with an extended shot of slaves waiting for an induction; it hovers on these waiting moments, drawing out the indeterminable time that Solomon himself will remain a slave. It captures these waiting periods well – and later in the film, the waiting periods become the most dramatic scenes of the movie.*⁵

Another pithy dimension of this visual is historically accurate musical narrative, specially the violin scores, created and developed by the trios - Hans Zimmer, Nicholas Britell and Ann Marie Calhoun. The film would have been terribly silent as an accurate portrayal of darkness, if music would not be there to complement that tragedy. The violin of Northup is an allegory of comfort and a connection to his former, happy world. *“I was indebted to my violin, my constant companion...and soother of my sorrows during years of servitude.”*⁶

Solomon's new world too has access to music, as songs are sung out over the cotton fields, but these tunes are now pulsated by the intimidating percussion of lashes. The groups

sing as they sleep and wake up, their mastered mornings and nights bring the music of captivity and tears, except for Northup, who always believed him to be a born free man and strived to attain that status. Once Epps ordered his slaves to sing and dance for his entertainment, Northup understood that music was never the same for them as it was once used to be, but still, music was there.

In the Academy Awards, 2014, *Twelve Years a Slave* was accoladed with three Oscars--best Motion Picture of the Year, best performance by an actress in a supporting role (Lupita Nyong'o, as Patsey) and best adapted screenplay (John Ridley).

The film is a story about one of the harshest structures that has ever been created in the history of the world and about someone wanting to live with his mind intact. It is a visual in poetry, the crusade of a man who said, "*My back is thick with scars for protesting my freedom.*" of a man who did not just want to survive as "*survival is not about certain death.*

It's about keeping your head down" and who wanted to "live" in the midst of that hellish malevolence.

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