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## **The Impact of Slave Narratives and Neo – Slave Narratives on the Emergence of Black Leadership**

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### **Abstract**

Slave narratives are some of the most tangible foundations of African American cultural heritage which chronicles the experiences of black people in America. They tell stories of heroism, and portray characters determined to overcome social limitations to change their lives. The challenges and difficult situations black people overcame are defined as crucibles from which they were able to extract wisdom, skills, and strength to achieve important leadership positions in a land that first denied them freedom.

**Key-words:** Black leadership, Slave narratives, Neo – slave narratives, Crucibles, Civil Rights Movements, Emancipation, Freedom

### **INTRODUCTION**

Despite the abundance and variety of writings and literary works on African Americans, and their contribution to the political and social evolution of the American society, black leadership is still an area of great interest in literature, and of significance in assessing the notion of leadership. The indelible impact on American people, black public figures, past or present, are always seen as a vital part of the dynamics of human progress in America. Significant social changes, as far as African American people are concerned, are usually associated with men and women such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth Toni Morrison, Martin Luther King, Barack Obama whose capacity to function as leaders emphasizes “the essence of leadership that is relevant to the modern age” (Burns:1-2). These people continue to inspire our cultural, intellectual, and political spheres. They have served with their talent, knowledge, and experiences, and they were profoundly committed to advance the prosperity and power of the United States of America.

The importance and influence of black leadership comes forth in so much literary and cultural discourses drawing our attention about the ability of African American leaders in their struggle to achieve freedom and equality. African Americans, at the intersection between slavery and segregation, have been able to develop leadership traits to achieve emancipation. For a nation whose founding principle is freedom, and a land where people are conscious of their freedom to pursuit happiness; and freedom to improve themselves; phenomena like slavery, racism, or segregation are perceived as contradictory to the ideals of liberty.

Although slavery was acknowledged as a violation of freedom, the core ideal of the American Revolution<sup>122</sup>, the Founding Fathers decided to exclude it from their reflection about the Constitution, to the point of obscuring the American people's perception of the black race. This situation prompted Nathan Huggins to write in *Radical History Review*:

The Founding Fathers, in their conception and framing of a more perfect union, did not address frankly and openly, in any of their official documents, the conspicuous fact of slavery. As far as race and slavery were concerned – both primary facts of their life and times – the Founding Fathers preferred to avoid the deforming mirror of truth. It is as if the Founding Fathers hoped to sanitize their new creation, ridding it of a deep and awful stain. If the evil was not mentioned or seen, it would be as if it were not there at all (25).

This statement raises the issue of American people dedication to the principles of liberty. Slavery is often seen as a discrediting facet of the Revolution's ideals and the Founding Fathers' moral values. They left a significant contradiction in the final draft of the American Constitution. They denied liberty to black people, and this contradiction has persisted over time. Therefore, the disparities that exist in the American society as far as racism is concerned are transmitted from generation to generation.

The oppression of African American people generated slave revolts or rebellion, which became an opportunity to enhance black leadership. In other terms, the most important steps in beginning the journey for liberty have been to identify leaders that could provide a direction to triumph over suffering. This fight for freedom, the heroic past of African Americans provides

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<sup>122</sup>-The American Revolution was a time when the British colonists in America rebelled against the rule of Great Britain. After the war, the first 13 colonies gained their freedom and became the independent country of the United States. Then broke their political connections to Great Britain and issued the Declaration of Independence adopted on July 4, 1776. It states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

a stage to understand the dynamics of black leadership, and the qualities that distinguish true leaders from other people, and how people develop leadership skills.

The paper aims at gaining understanding of the notion of black leadership in relation to African American literature specifically slave narratives and neo – slave narratives, and how the experiences of slavery and segregation influenced the shaping of black leaders, aspirations, and abilities in leadership positions.

### **1. Insights about the Notion of Leadership in Literature**

The issue of leadership has been intensely discussed in literature, especially in the field of social sciences. A review of leadership in literature demonstrates that the notion of leadership is usually based on the traits and characteristics of leaders. Ralph Stogdill (1974) defines leadership as the art of making compliance and a set of behavior that create influence. Curphy and Hogan in *What We Know about Leadership* (1994) suggest that leadership is the capacity of persuading people to pursue a common goal that is important for the welfare of a community or a group. As for Gardner in his book *On Leadership* (1990), defines leadership as the process by which an individual influences a group to pursue a common purpose.

In his book *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns, an American political scientist, considers many approaches to leadership. He defines leadership as a special form of power that consists of motive and resource, control, authority, or influence over others. Burns also mentions that leadership is in crisis because of “the mediocrity or irresponsibility of so many of the men and women in power” (1). Today, for lack of leadership, the world is in decay economically, politically, and spiritually; and people from all over the world are looking for leaders to follow; and solutions to unemployment, terrorism, immigration, climate change etc. Countries are facing economic crisis, political conflicts, nuclear threats, cultural clashes, immigration tensions, religious conflicts etc., and the prospects for many nations are still bleak. According to Burns, the recurrent failure of many companies, institutions, and governments highlights the mediocrity by which leadership is exercised.

Leadership has become an important factor of success or failure to private and public organizations such as multinationals, academic, social, and political institutions, non-governmental organizations etc. Burns’ arguments are great significance as far as leadership is concerned. He draws our attention on the fundamentals of leadership reminding us of our tendency to be systematically subjective when it comes to issues on leadership. People in

authority are expected to have a set of traits and ideas for which they stand to inspire people to pursue a shared vision. Bass and Costley (2001) describe that type of leadership as a process used by an individual to influence a group of people toward a common goal. In the same light, Maxwell simply states, “Leadership is influence” (1993). Together these notions of leadership focus on the capacity of a person to drive change and give direction through a conscious, receptive, and trusting connection with people.

Despite its centrality in American Studies, the field of leadership puts into play a set of specific issues that have yet not been fully investigated. Although studies on leadership have improved and its understanding has expanded, James MacGregor Burns says “We know far too little about leadership” (1). By saying that, he clearly indicates that most of our assumptions about leadership are still inaccurate, far from reality and therefore unproductive. For this reason, “new forms of governance and leadership will have to be learned” (Schein 67). Literature provides excellent tools for learning about leadership. Novels, short stories, plays, and poetry can help us understand leadership traits and abilities. Literary works can be used to stimulate thoughts and discussions and enrich the understanding of the characteristics of leadership.

In his book, *Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership Through Literature*, Joseph L. Badaracco Jr. talks about how works of fiction “let us watch leaders as they think, worry, hope, hesitate, commit, exult, regret, and reflect... These books draw us into leaders’ worlds, put us in their shoes, and at times let us share their experiences” (3). Literature provides unique insights into the human experience and cultivates critical thinking. Literature is an effective tool for engaging us in critical thinking about leadership. By learning to analyze and evaluate literary texts suitable to leadership qualities, we can help them develop critical thinking skills which involves analyzing events, characters and assessing both the content of a text and the rhetoric used to express ideas. Literature has an important role in exposing social issues including leadership. It brings us closer to human attitude and helps us understand our responsibilities in society.

Literature is an interesting way of investigating leaders. It helps us see things as the people in the stories see them. Writers allows us to see the inner life of characters, the way there are imagined and described. When we look inside literary works, we realize that writers of any era deal with diverse and enriching subjects. These writings are an inexhaustible source of understanding and wisdom for society. Literature or any other fictional work has a positive impact on the evolution of social values and the city. This is the reason why Badaracco says:

You could describe what fiction does particularly well is it introduces people to ethical complexities. And some of the complexities are around the ethical principles. Others are more emotional, psychological around things involving self-discipline, focus. They really see the large, complex, sometimes messy sphere of things that are genuinely ethical (2006).

Joseph Badaracco believes that literary works are often a description of leaders' lives because they are character – driven, and they engage the reader in the story. In a word, people learn about themselves and others through reading, and that includes the life of leaders.

## **2. Understanding of the Process of Leadership Development through Literature**

We identify two main theoretical and literary contributions in the process of leadership development. In his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell writes: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (23). Considering the most basic defining moments of a leader’s life, Campbell provides an archetypal narrative scheme of the leader’s journey called the “monomyth”:

This fundamental structure contains a number of stages, which include: First, the hero is often born in mysterious circumstances, or undergoes a serious life challenge early on. [...] In the monomyth, the hero starts in the ordinary world, and receives a call to enter an unusual world of strange powers and events. If the hero accepts the call to enter this strange world, the hero must face tasks and trials, and may have to face these trials alone, or may have assistance. At its most intense, the hero must survive a severe challenge, often with help earned along the journey. If the hero survives, the hero may achieve a great gift or “boon.” [...] The stories of Osiris, Prometheus, Moses, Buddha, and Christ, for example, follow this structure very closely (“Schoolworkhelper Editorial Team” 2019).

Joseph Campbell explores vital transformational steps of a leader, outlining the different stages from psychological development, personal transformation, and the deployment of human potential to an accomplished leader. For Campbell, leaders are often born in mysterious circumstances or undergo serious life challenges which allow them to develop certain abilities that make them able to accept a call to lead. This epic structure of the leader’s journey defined by Joseph Campbell is adapted by Christopher Vogler in twelve major steps in his *Twelve Stage of Hero’s Journey* (2007).

First, heroes are introduced in the ordinary world, where they receive the call to adventure. They are reluctant at first or refuse the call but are encouraged by a mentor to cross the first threshold and enter the special world, where they encounter tests, allies, and enemies. Then, they approach the inmost cave, crossing a second threshold where they endure the ordeal. They take possession of their reward and are pursued on the road back to the ordinary world. They cross the third threshold, experience a resurrection, and are transformed by the experience. Finally, they return with the elixir, a boon or treasure to benefit the ordinary world.

These symbolic stages of the leader's training defined by Campbell as *The Hero's Journey* is based on the stories of Buddha, Moses, and Christ and many other classic myths from many other cultures. These people received and accepted a call to leadership. Joseph Campbell uses these examples to show that the moment we realize that there is a possibility to transform our ways of doing things, to change things, and to act with greater authenticity, a door can open if we agree to step in. This last step is a destabilizing one because it shows us a new way, while illuminating the changes to be made. It can be scary because it challenges our certainties and makes us loss of our comfort. Some turn down the call and wait for a better opportunity or a more favorable time. Others sees as a salutary occasion, a long-awaited light and opportunity for movement.

Leadership also derives from inner transformation and permanent spiritual awakening because of intense trauma and turmoil. Trials exert such a transformative effect and awake the infinite capacity of human beings to overcome sufferings and lead to a greater, and more glorious condition. For Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, this process and ability to reinvent oneself is what “enables one leader to inspire confidence, loyalty, and hard work, while others — with equal vision and intelligence—stumble” (39-45). Bennis and Thomas demonstrate that leaders are the product of transformative and intense experiences “often traumatic — and always unplanned” called crucibles that force leaders to ponder over their identity, personality, and purpose in life. In the terms of Bennis and Thomas crucibles are a set of experiences that redefine people and hone their skills. Back to the Bronze Age, the crucible was a vessel used to refine metals. People heated the crucible to high temperature so that the metal could melt. At the end of the process, they got rid of the residues and rocks, and shaped the metal. The term ‘crucible’ in literature is a metaphor used to describe a mould or a series of trials in which characters find themselves which ultimately impact and change the character into something new. Bennis and Thomas used this concept to describe the experiences that shape leaders. They state that leaders “[emerge] from the crucible stronger and more sure of

themselves and their purpose — changed in some fundamental way” (Warren and Thomas 39). According to them, information and experiences help people develop leadership skills and attributes of effective leaders.

This notion of hero or leader’s journey and crucibles are the thematic hallmarks of slave narratives due to the frequent tests, and ordeals slaves face in their stories. Passing through a crucible test allows them to prove their leadership virtue and transforms them into legendary epic heroes or leaders for African American people. Different life experiences work together to make leaders or develop leadership potential in individuals. In African American literature, autobiographies, and slave narratives<sup>123</sup>, as records of the unique story of the struggle of African American people, are sources to discover the crucibles that have given meaning and direction both personally and collectively to black leaders.

### **3. The crucibles of Black leadership in Slave Narratives and Neo-slave Narratives**

In African American literature the autobiographies of ex-slaves are known as slave narratives. They are the foundation of African American literature, and they recount the personal experiences and cultural values of African people in the United States of America.

As a literary process aiming at describing, one’s life and history, narratives and autobiographies are often poorly defined, and their legitimacy as relevant literary sources was debated by critics. However, Philippe Lejeune, a French writer provides us with a definition that enrich our understanding. In *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (1975), he defines autobiography as “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). His theory of autobiography helps set spatio – temporal guidelines and identify common criteria that can be used to define narratives and autobiographies as a literary genre with an objective perception of the story. There is a kind of implicit pact between the reader and the author. The author shows himself/herself as he/she is and tells the truth about his/her life which allows the reader to make an objective judgment.

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<sup>123</sup> - A genre of African American literature made up of the written accounts of enslaved Africans in Europe and America.

Slave narratives are among the most compelling sources for examining the life of African American people. Henry Louis Gates Jr., writes, “The narratives of ex-slaves are, for the literary critic, the very generic foundation upon which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and nonfictional narrative forms extended, refigured, and troped (xxxiii).” They are a form of autobiographies with unique structures and themes that tell the stories of African Americans’ walk from slavery to freedom.

Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick Douglass’s *Narratives* exemplify these works. Many contemporary black authors have adapted their narratives to what is known as contemporary African American narratives (Edward). Contemporary African American narratives also known as neo-slave narratives (Bell) include works such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1966) or *Crusade for Justice - The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (1970). In *Black Boy*, Wright tells his journey from a life of oppression to freedom. These autobiographies incorporate elements such as the pursuit of mental and physical freedom, a notion that connect them to the slave narratives.

The black slave narrative is one of the most tangible foundations of African American cultural heritage which chronicles the horrors and experiences of slavery. African American autobiographies or slave narratives, and neo – slave narratives describe the life of individuals who rose from the depths of slavery to overcome seemingly impossible odds. They provide the most dominant sources of African people experience in America. They tell of the horrors of slavery and segregation. They also tell stories of heroism, and portray black characters determined to overcome societal and self-imposed limitations to change their lives. These challenging experiences and difficult situations are crucibles from which African American people were able to extract wisdom, skills, and strength to achieve important leadership positions.

In her book *Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times* (2017), Nancy Koehn argues that these stories “gives us perspectives on how other people, in other times, dealt with huge challenges and large opportunities. [They] provide a sharp lens through which to view ordinary people doing extraordinary things. [They] also exposes the fallacies in some of our current assumptions about leadership. [These] stories make it clear that leaders can emerge from many different backgrounds: genders, races, and personality types” (26). They are an important contribution to our effort of understanding leadership as well. They enrich our perception of leadership and provide us with a better understanding of the lives of

African American leaders. One of the authors of slave narratives who captures our attention in this analysis is Frederick Douglass who has forged his leadership in a period of crisis and pain:

“Douglass’s story opens in 1847, when he returned to the United States from Great Britain, where he had sought safety from death threats and potential recapture. Once back in America, he staked out a bold, self-determined path as a speaker, writer, and political agitator for the cause of black freedom. His ability to walk this path owed a great deal to what he’d learned as a slave in Maryland—one who’d escaped from bondage in 1838—and as an orator for the growing abolition movement” (Koehn 26-31).

Douglass’ experiences and abilities set a clear indication of the powerful principles that led him to become one of the great African – American leaders. He became a prominent leader of the anti-slavery movement. Douglass was a powerful voice that led to the abolition of slavery in the United States of America. His *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* was the first of his three autobiographies. His two other autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (2015) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1996), are a continuation of his narrative. Douglass’s narratives revolve around the problem of slavery in a country founded on the principles of freedom and equality. He mainly depicts his experience as a slave, and the process by which he achieved freedom and became a leader in the struggle for black emancipation. Much like Douglass, Booker T. Washington was also born in slavery around 1859. He is known as an educator, and one of the greatest American leaders who fought for the advancement of African Americans. He advocated for economic and industrial education of Black people.

In *Up from Slavery* (1901), Washington describes his odyssey from the life of a slave to that of a leader. Born from an unknown father, Washington began life as a slave. Yet, he was able to rise from these unbearable and overwhelming circumstances to achieve prominent leadership positions. He tells about his childhood as a slave and his efforts to achieve freedom through education. He recounts his trials and experience as founder of the well – known black college, Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In other words, his autobiography is an account of his role as educator and his own development into a leader. Another African American figure who had risen under difficult circumstances to achieve influence and esteem from his generation is Malcom X. He was born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. His autobiography co – authored by Alex Haley is a remarkable true story in which he recounts his capacity of transcending his condition of social waster to become a leader.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was published in 1965 and was hailed as a literary classic shortly after it appeared. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* does not only trace Malcolm

X's leadership role in the struggle for racial equality and his commitment to black empowerment and self-governance. It is also a narrative that outlines Malcolm X's formative experiences of his identity as an African American, his self-education and religious conversion while in prison.

Like the first three books, *The autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* posthumously published in 1998 also provides a context to understand the crucibles of leadership. *The autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* is a collection of King's papers edited by Clayborne Carson. King begins his autobiography by talking about his early years in the segregated south, where his father was a pastor in the local church. He describes his first experience with racism and goes on to discuss his education and the indelible impression of men like Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Marx or Mahatma Gandhi had on his life and how they framed his mentality. Thanks to his achievements during the civil rights movement, he is, certainly, the most praised of African American leaders of the twentieth century.

These narratives provide insights and inspiration on the issue of leadership. The speeches, roles and attitudes of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. continue to inspire American people. One must remember that those are the result of several historical events, circumstances and experiences known as crucibles which are essential to our understanding of how leaders are developed. In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey writes:

It's not what happens to us, but our response to what happens to us that hurts us. Of course, things can hurt us physically or economically and can cause sorrow. But our character, our basic identity, does not have to be hurt at all. In fact, our most difficult experiences become the crucibles that forge our character and develop the internal powers, the freedom to handle difficult circumstances in the future and to inspire others to do so as well [...] Nothing has a greater, longer lasting impression upon another person than the awareness that someone has transcended suffering, has transcended circumstance, and is embodying and expressing a value that inspires and ennobles and lifts life (73).

Considering Covey's statements, we understand how the experiences of black people throughout history have contributed to the emergence of black leadership. In line with Covey's statement, crucibles are life – changing experiences that can significantly affect thinking and actions. What a person gets from these experiences are often considered as life – lessons. Referring to these life – changing experiences, Rick Warren says, “[They] are like jewels, shaped with the hammer and chisel of adversity” (196). That is why crucibles can be an

opportunity to learn, grow, shape, and develop leader. The experiences and circumstances of slavery, and racial discrimination highlight how African American leaders have used their social, and political issues to participate in the making of the American nation. The identity and notion of Black leadership are deeply rooted in the crucibles of black people during slavery and segregation.

Black narratives are also stories of self-esteem, personal discovery, and self-educated people. A character that illustrates that aspect is Malcolm X. He struggled with his identity and image as a black boy. But he finally found sense to his life by nurturing himself with knowledge and connecting with people who could inspire him and instruct him about his personal identity and his environment as a black man. After all his difficult experiences, he was able to find meaning to his life and live in a more stable, linear, and predictable conditions. In his autobiography, he says:

I believe that it would be almost impossible to find anywhere in America a black man who has lived further down in the mud of human society than I have; or a black man who has been any more ignorant than I have been; or a black man who has suffered more anguish during his life than I have. But it is only after the deepest darkness that the greatest joy can come; it is only after slavery and prison that the sweetest appreciation of freedom can come (Malcolm X 387).

Malcolm's perspective of life changed after he went through all these difficult conditions. He learned from all hardships and came out with a more rounded personality completely transformed. Those phases of his life equipped him to be a leader for his community. The different crucible experiences described in slave narratives and neo – slave narratives are key elements from which black leaders derived their core qualities. The rise of these leaders during the Civil Rights Movement marked a key turning point in the history of race relations in America.

## CONCLUSION

Black leadership has many stages of development and growth that reveal how black people chose to embrace the challenges of slavery and segregation as an opportunity to liberate themselves from their past and build a better future. Those who confronted the brutal reality of their condition were able to prevail the barriers of oppression on the road to freedom and emerged as incontestable leaders. The notion of black leadership and its mechanisms are perceived through the lens of black civic movements, literature, and culture. Values such as self-reliance, determination, and courage displayed by black leaders are universal virtues. However, the unique texture of experiences and history of African American people as recorded in slave narratives and neo – slave narratives demonstrate the resilience of black leaders. The notion of black leadership features this capacity of resilience and the leadership approach and methods used to achieve freedom.

What also distinguishes black leadership is the fact slave narratives were fundamental to the success of abolitionist movements and the Civil Rights Movements. They had a great ideological impact on black leaders helping to overcome mental and physical barriers set in place by the slave and segregation system. Therefore, black leadership is a consequence of the abolitionist movements born from the slave narratives. From the early days of slavery, leaders emerged among the black community to pave the ways of freedom, and today's black leadership owes its success to the hardships overcome by people like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth. This explains why Washington says: "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which [one] has overcome while trying to succeed" (16).

Arguably, the foundations of contemporary black leadership most identify itself with the revolutionary struggle of black people during slavery and segregation. So, one sees that black leadership is a dynamic rather than static movement deeply grounded in slave narratives which will need to continue structuring its organization with the perspective of achieving black freedom worldwide.

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