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**Sexual Exploitation and Objectification of Black Women in
David Wilson's *12 Years a Slave* (1853) and its Movie
Adaptation:
A Feminist Study**

**A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of
Master in Language and Culture**

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Dedication

It is of great honor to dedicate this humble work to my family and friends, and my supervisor.

- **Arrif Siham**

Dedication

I dedicate this work:

To my father's precious soul may God have mercy on him.

To my mother, the source of tenderness and love, the apple of my eye, who encouraged, motivated and supported me when I thought it was the end.

To my lovely sisters Romaisa and Houda.

To my dear brother Ramzi who helped me during my bad times.

To my dearest friends Mouna, Safa, Rahma.

To my classmates and colleagues with whom I spent the most beautiful days of university.

- **Sraoui Sara**

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Abstract

This research aims to shed light on black women specifically the disadvantaged exploited black women in David Wilson's *12 Years a Slave* (1853), as narrated by Solomon Northup, combined with scenes from the movie that was adapted by Steve McQueen (2013). Northup spoke of the ill treatment he received, and the life of men and women whom they worked side by side in the slave community. Yet, it is interesting to note that women had been subjected to and experienced horrific psychological trauma, male patriarchy, physical and sexual abuse for they were seen as lustful beings, however, they are only a victim of sexual objectification and exploitation of both white and black men. Therefore, it is important to note and acknowledge the heartless and unfair treatment which these brave women had to experience in order to survive, and to voice out their stories rather than being silenced or ignored by society and male-controlled environment, also to encourage, inspire women to stand up for themselves and fight for their rights, and to dismiss any negative images of these black women.

Keywords: abuse, black feminism, exploitation, objectification, sexual, slavery

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General Introduction

History books are an amazing source for knowledge, especially if people are interested in racism issues, African American literature, slave movies, and also slave narrative. The latter is a type of literary genre that deals with non-fiction stories about lived experiences of African American people either men or women the likes of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, even though black women experiences are hardly acknowledged throughout history.

Moreover, people must be aware of the past, since slavery still lives among them even though it is not as obvious as before, yet it can be seen at different areas of daily life specifically women, exactly black women whom suffered tenfold, consequently, choosing this specific field of study to work with.

Slavery was and always will be engraved as a stigma in the American history that occurred around the seventeenth until nineteenth century. Moreover, slavery will forever serve as a shameful reminder of the struggle of Black people that has a long history rooted in centuries of oppression towards both men and women. This terrible act leads to dehumanization which is “the process in which a group or an individual is perceived and treated less than fully human, it involves the denial of those characteristics or attributes that constitute what is to be human” (Bartk 03). Meaning that even both white people and African Americans are human beings with the same human traits, yet black people are treated less than humans and more like animals.

The reality of American slavery was often brutal to even imagine, depriving someone from their basic human rights, unpaid work, and inappropriate food, extreme physical and verbal abuse, not to mention being psychologically traumatized under the hands of their masters who considered them to be merely a property they owned, and controlled. Performing different kinds of labor under terrible work conditions, from sunset to sunrise in

cotton or tobacco plantations ruled by superior whites, having little if no time to rest at all. Any kind of resistance or attempt of rebellion is a crime that must be punished for severely and since slaves had no legal rights, therefore could not fight back. Jennifer Hallam stated in her article “Men, Women, and Gender” that:

For black men and women, slavery was an equally devastating experience. Both were torn from homeland and family. Both were forced to perform grueling labor, subjected to mental and physical degradation, and denied their most basic rights. Enslaved men and women were beaten mercilessly, separated from loved ones arbitrarily, and regardless of sex, treated as property in the eyes of the law. (01)

At some point, an enslavement that lasted more than two centuries came to an end when the colonies became independent of Great Britain. Even though at some Southern states, slavery of black people was widely embraced for it contributed in the development of the country’s economy growth and the prosperity for millions of Americans on the behalf of what they considered inferior. The hunger for wealth left no place for argumentation since they thought of themselves as the dominating and superior race which was the justification of centuries of cruelty, and inexcusable inequality. This relationship between the enslaver and enslaved was showcased through countless true stories of surviving slaves during that era in addition to the bitter realities of their experience and the day-to-day life on the slave plantations.

Out of all the stories that were told, *12 Years a Slave* (1853) is a historical testimony to the horrors of slavery in America pre-civil war, this gut-wrenching story narrated by Solomon Northup who spent ‘12 years as a slave’ in the deep south, exposing the inhumanity and injustice of slavery inspiring other major African American works the likes of: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), and Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).

This story was written by David Wilson, a white lawyer who mentioned at the beginning that he had not manipulated the words of Northup and he had no intentions to do so. He stated that “My object is, to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, leaving it for others to determine, whether even the pages of fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or severer bondage” (*12 Years a Slave* 5). Yet, Manohla Dargis, a film critic, asserts that “Northup’s account is considered one of the most authentic descriptions of slavery from the view point of the slave himself,” indicating that many ex-slaves attempted to write their own experiences, yet, it was not an easy task to achieve and to gain the credibility to deliver these truths about slavery to the world.

Not to mention that Northup’s story caught the attention of Steve McQueen who in 2013 directed and released a film under the same name *Twelve Years a Slave*, that was named the best film of 2013 by several critics in spite of the fact that it was not the first film about slavery in the United States. However, Dargis, a film critic in the *New York time*, stated that “it may however be the one that finally makes it impossible for American cinema to continue to sell the ugly lies it’s been hawking for more than a century.” It is without a doubt, a true cinematic Academy award winning piece of work, with its raw graphic scenes.

It was not uncommon at the time kidnapping black people and selling and enslaving them, which happened to Northup; a New Yorker who was born as freeman in July 1808, the son of Mintus Northup a former slave although was freed following the death of his master, his mother was unknown, yet he mentioned that she died during his captivity. He later on married Anne Hampton and had three children Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo all while living in Saratoga Springs where they provided for themselves doing seasonal work such as farming and sometimes he worked as a local fiddler.

This peaceful life took a dramatic turn when he was deceived by two white men introduced to him by one of his acquaintances, under the name of Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton, who claimed they were circus performers in Washington DC seeking an expert violin player to join them in their performances which he had no choice but to accept after their generous offer of employment with high wages, leaving his wife and children behind. Unfortunately for him, his freedom did not last when he fell ill after drinking to wake up in chains in a slave pen when he sadly confessed “What had I done to deserve imprisonment in such a dungeon? I could not comprehend” (*12 Years a Slave* 28). Northup’s kidnapers robbed him of his free papers that were the only evidence of his liberty after his many protests that fell on deaf ears leading to severe beatings followed by his transfer, his name change to Platt, and sold off to different masters eventually ending being sold to the sadistic and cruel Edwin Epps who owned a cotton plantation near the Red River, Louisiana in the spring of 1843. There, he spent the remaining 8 years of enslavement until he was rescued and restored to his family in 1853.

Nonetheless, Northup’s story among many untold stories that had not seen the light or rather been silenced; is a perfect example of the brutality and hardship of enslavement in a white male-controlled environment and through indescribable circumstances during the slavery era. They were clearly seen and treated as animals; this is supported by Northup’s stating about his former Master Edwin Epps: “[he] looked upon the black man simply as animals, differing in no respect from any other animal, save in the gift of speech and the possession of somewhat higher instinct, and, therefore, the more valuable” (163). In addition to the beating, the whipping, verbal abuse, and terrible work conditions, Northup further adds:

The existence of slavery in its most cruel form among them has a tendency to brutalize the human and finer feelings of their nature. Daily witness of human

suffering__listening to the agonizing screeches of the slave__beholding him writhing beneath the merciless lash__bitten and torn by dogs__dying without attention, and buried without shroud or coffin. (130)

However, during his enslavement period, women around Northup did not go unnoticed since from the beginning of his story telling, he had mentioned and detailed their own experience and the same if not the worst hardship they went through.

History Professor Brenda Elian Stevenson expressed in her article “*12 Years a Slave: Narrative, History, and Film*,” “women’s experiences were significant part of what Northup chose to expose once he regained his freedom” (01). Signifying that not only did Northup told his part of the suffering through his years of enslavement, he also included some woman who he took notice of at the beginning of his story.

Northup’s first encounter with a slave woman is mentioned in the third chapter, a woman named Eliza who was a mother separated from her two children, promised freedom but sold to another slave-owner, and eventually dies from heartbreak and sorrow. Patsey can be said to be an essential female figure in the story, a young slave woman described by Epps as the Queen of the cotton field, who also believed that she belonged to him and was a subject to Epps’s sexual aggression, physical abuse and his wife’s intense jealousy. Mistress Epps was generally described as a nice woman who is polite with the slaves and cares for them, except for Patsey who took the blame for her husband’s actions, and perceived her as a threat to her marriage. Harriet Shaw is only mentioned as a black wife of a white man who lives a comfortable life.

It is no doubt admirable yet heart-breaking the patience these enslaved black female held, the years of suffering, being an easy target to both black and white men, their silent acceptance of the barbaric nature of the slave life meant their submission. Sojourner Truth, a woman’s rights activist who was born into slavery, stated that “when black people are talked

about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women” (*ain't I a Woman*, 21). This indicates that whenever there are black women concerned people turn a blind eye as if they do not exist.

1-1- Statement of the problem

This leading to the overwhelming need to address the main problem in this study that is the issues of Black female characters in *12 Years a Slave* who were a subject of sexual exploitation, objectification and degrading practices that left them traumatized while being enslaved and in the hands of white men.

Each of these female characters went through brutish images which Northup and McQueen detailed in their narrative and movie scenes, showing their vulnerability, oppression, all types of abuse imaginable, and their survival during all these inhuman acts. McQueen has stated that: “one of the aspects of Northup’s autobiography that convinced him to choose this narrative to film was the numerous images of enslaved women, whom Solomon Northup detailed in his lengthy account” (Stevenson 01).

Azmi Luthfiana added “the female slaves faced some bad treatment from women and men, as seen from the movie, black women’s struggle is depicted through unfairness life as women and human being perceived by the characters” (11). Sexual and racial differentiation is one of the major themes in this research along with black feminism or also known as Afro-feminism.

This dissertation argues that the issue of enslaved woman is undervalued and their experience found in Northup’s autobiography *12 Years a Slave* is solid evidence to such brutal acts. It also argues that the movie is also a reflection of black feminism issues that are manifested in female slaves. Meaning that even though nearly all writers, and movie directors mainly focus on male characters experiences in their works and movies, however, Northup

and McQueen did not overshadow the female characters, nonetheless they provided beautiful yet painful insight of what female slaves had endure in order to survive.

1-2- Literature Review

This work demands that some truths of black female characters in *12 Years a Slave* must be depicted along with establishing some levels of accuracy from the movie adaptation through some chosen scenes acted out. This work specifically explores and analyzes the aforementioned female characters along with identifying and introducing some themes like: slavery and black feminism. Also, it tries to reveal social diversity of women's experiences and the hardship as it was described by Northup's autobiography and acted out in the movie adaptation *12 Years a Slave*.

Loucynda Jensen stated in "Searching the Silence: Finding Black Women's Resistance to Slavery in Antebellum U.S History" that "slave women's particular experiences are easily overshadowed by the overwhelming amount of literature on male experience" (01). Signifying that most if not all scholars or writers neglect to directly address the challenging experiences of black women who had to go through it over the years if not until this day and their heroic resistance for survival considering they were at the bottom of the chain.

Additionally, Frances Beal explains in his "Double Jeopardy: 'to be black and female'" that:

...The black women have been subjected to the worst kinds of exploitation and oppression. As black, she has to endure all the horrors of slavery and living in a racist society; as a worker, she has been the object of continual exploitation, occupying the lowest place on the wage scale and resisted to the most demeaning and uncreative jobs, she has seen physical images defamed and been the object of the white master's uncontrollable lust and subjected to all the ideals of white womanhood as a model to which she would aspire: as a mother, she has seen her children torn from her breast

and sold into slavery, she has seen them left home without attention while she attended to the needs of offsprings of the ruling class...In addition, besides suffering the common fate of all oppressed and exploited people, the Afro-American women continued to experience the age-old oppression of women by men. In home, she becomes the "slave of a slave". (207)

The latter is a clear confirmation of the status black women had in society and the double struggle they went through during that era of enslavement.

1-3- The Rational:

The reason behind choosing to carry out this study is that the black enslaved women are constantly overshadowed and dominated by both male and society. Hence, the need to bring the much-needed female perspective to light, also the need to address the admirable power which these black female carry in resisting whatever the world throws at their way from hardship, struggles, and brutal force of circumstances.

1-4- Methodology:

This study depicts and analyzes black female experiences through what was represented in Northup autobiography supporting it with scenes from the film adaptation of McQueen, in addition to extracting some images of objectification of the enslaved women. This research relies heavily on Feminism since this study deals mainly with black female characters. The novel *12 Years a Slave* and its movie adaptation are the major source of this study; Using *12 Years a Slave* that was written by David Wilson, a real representation of slavery from a point of view of a slave himself to analyze women's struggle. This study gradually demonstrates the inseparable experience of black women of racism, sexism, and the oppression of both men and society that has deeply rooted in the US history and that is rarely acknowledged, it also highlights the treatment slave women received away from male centered roles.

Moreover, this study depends in its investigation concerning sexual objectification and exploitation of black women during the period of enslavement according to Northup's point of view in *12 Years a Slave*, on fundamental sources of books and articles in which this research is of much need to carry out: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, an African American writer who was born into slavery. Also, Gloria Jean Watkins, or better known as bell hooks, an American author who was best known for her writing on race and feminism the likes of *Feminism is for everybody* (2000), in addition to Angela Davis's *The Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves* (1971). Besides, *Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women*, an article written by Carolyn M. West and Kalimah Johnson, as well as, Nahoras Bona Simarmata's: *Black's Reactions Towards Slavery as seen in 12 Years a Slave*.

1-5- Structure of the dissertation:

This work consists of two parts, Chapter One, entitled Theoretical Background that deals mainly with the theoretical framework of the study. It introduces some needed definitions of: slavery, misogynoir, giving priority to the term black feminism, sexual objectification and exploitation of black women in *12 Years a Slave*, Furthermore, to urgently address the sensitive issue of sexual objectification and exploitation of women generally and black women specifically.

Chapter Two, Analyzing Sexual Objectification and Exploitation in *Twelve Years a Slave*, analyzes and scrutinizes female characters while applying some chosen feminist concepts on the female characters in the movie adaptation. In addition to addressing the vivid pictures that McQueen provided in his adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* regarding female characters involvement in some unjustified and degrading actions that they faced in the sadistic environment of slavery.

Finally, this study ends with a conclusion. It contains the summary of the study. To give significant insights of the importance of equality of both genders, stop using woman's vulnerability and powerlessness as an excuse to sexually objectify and exploit them and start appreciating and treating black women as a priority as they absolutely deserve.

Chapter One: Theoretical background

This part of the study is dedicated to introduce some key terms which are highly important to this research analysis. In order to explain the various black female struggles during slavery, sexual objectification and exploitation are the main concern of the study coupled with some realistic evidence in the shape of chosen scenes from the movie adaptation *12 years a slave* by Steve McQueen. The latter focuses on the issue of enslaved women. Brenda E. Stevenson stated in “*12 Years a Slave: Narrative, History, and Film 2014*” that “Steve McQueen seems particularly determined to tell the stories of enslaved women in this film” (01).

Along with exposing the cruel reality of slavery that many Hollywood movies tried to soften, through realistic images of trauma and violence, abuse and degrading verbal insults, Douglas Kellner supported this by stating: “throughout the film, McQueen deploys modernist strategies of excess to demonstrate the horrors and inhumanity of black slaves being beaten into submission, with repeated images of whips loudly lashing black bodies, close-ups of bloodied scars, and lacerated and humiliated humans, and the sound of whips tearing the flesh, and of the humans subjected to such brutal violence ... bodies being brutalized and individuals screaming in pain” (07).

Moreover, since this study basically centers around the issue of black women and their experience during their enslavement specifically in the book *12 Years a Slave*, through visual performances directed by McQueen, and the representation of these black women in the slave community and their daily struggle on the plantation as told by Northup, however, some adjustments and modifications can be found in the movie, yet, it only added to the realistic cruelty and at times overwhelming scenes that only added to the beauty of this cinematic masterpiece.

One of the main themes in this study is without doubt slavery that is defined to be human being classed as a property. It had existed around the world and throughout history in various periods and different places. Fatiha Barber and Houria Hassani Mabrouki defined slavery in their dissertation “Slavery in America: origin, struggle, and resistance 1619-1865:” that “Slavery is an institution refers to the condition in which individuals are owned by others who control where they live and where they work; to the extent they separate them from their relatives ... generally, the person becomes a slave as a result of their capture, purchase, or birth” (04). This definition of slavery is one in a million definitions, having in common some traits such as being treated as a property, being sold and bought many more forms of wrong doings that are reflected throughout centuries in American history. They further clarify:

Slaves and slave trade played a great role in American history ... [slaves’] task was to work in the vast plantations and to do all the hard work... their life was very hard, they experienced brutal treatment from their masters, enslaved women engaged by force in a sexual relationship...although enslaved Africans were forcibly rooted from their homeland, their culture, and their families paved the way to the American growth. (34)

Meaning that slaves and slave trade at the time was the center of American economy due to forced labor at large plantations or any place the slave was assigned.

Generally speaking, no person with her/his right state of mind denies that slavery and freedom existed side by side since the early history of America where black people lost the term human or any term that represents human characters. Frantz Fanon, who was a Francophone Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, political philosopher, and Marxist, claimed in his most known book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that whiteness, Fanon asserts, has become a *symbol of purity, of justice, truth, virginity*” yet he added that “Blackness represents the

diametrical opposite: in the collective unconsciousness, it stands for *ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality*; Even the dictionary definition of white means clean and pure” (14).

This demonstrates that no matter human traits a person might carry, however, hers/his skin color does show and classifies their place in society, more specifically the slave society, therefore, a black skinned person is unfortunately considered mere a slave regardless of their gender.

Frantz Fanon added in his book *The Wretched of the Earth (1961)*: “Violence in colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm’s length; it seeks to dehumanize the; Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language ... if he shows fight, soldiers’ fire and he’s a dead man” (13). These words obviously have a clear and direct meaning that white skinned people only recognize them as property, a double aimed object, it can clearly be seen in the master and slave relationship, it was not easy for both genders to submit, for males to lose their masculinity and for females to be used as sexual and degrading objects for males of both skin. In addition Nahoras Boma Simarmata encourages: “The whites treated them as something instead of someone” (04).

Basically meaning that black people were viewed and treated as less than human along with being regularly beaten and punished for the smallest mistakes or any attempt of resistance from men and women, these punishments and beatings sometimes lead to the commitment of suicide for many slaves rather than suffer the oppression they received and racism they faced through centuries.

American sociologist professor Patricia Hill Collins defines oppression as “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (04), this implies that oppression includes exploitation, abuse of people and their rights based on different positions within society for instance: race, class, gender.

However, much more remains unsaid about black women's own involvement and heroic resistance of slavery especially in terms of oppression, inequality, exploitation, discrimination, and sexual objectification including: rape, sexual assault, physical abuse. Azmi Luthfiana explains in her thesis "*Black Feminism Struggle Reflected by Female Slaves in 12 Years a Slave (2013) Movie*":

Black females here had no gap as far as they have the same status as slaves. They are forced to work to their slavers, unfortunately, the lack of attention to the black female drives people to set aside the black female slave experience ... However , the black female slave was profited as laborer in the plantation, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of slaver's sexual willingness (20).

Bartky (1990) defined sexual objectification in her article (*Mechanistic Dehumanization*) as: "Individual is reduced from being a person to the status of a mere instrument who can then be used and consumed for the pleasure of others". This explains the recent research that suggests that black women report higher levels of experienced objectification than any other ethnic group, meaning that African females generally and slaves specifically received the brunt of this mass brutalization by the so called the superior race.

Angela Davis who is an American political activist, author, professor at the University of California, and a feminist stated in her book *The Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves* that : "A great deal has been said about the black man resistance, but very little about the unique relationship black women bore to the resistance struggles during slavery"(03); meaning that women were not given equal importance and are overlooked and rarely ever mentioned by historians regardless of their own harsh experience in the slave community and the struggle through the daily forces of hard work which is somehow understandable since they were overshadowed by both black and white men and also white women.

However, that was not the case in the autobiography of Northup who during the period of his enslavement not only did he talk about slavery in general, he also took notice of the oppressed female slaves around him and according to Baker (2003), “the oppressed individual or group is devalued, exploited, and deprived of privileges by the individual or group which has more power”.

Harriet Jacobs Lament added: “Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women”, implicating that even though men at the time were seen and treated as property, nonetheless, women also had their fair share inequality and ill treatment. Hence twelve years a slave showed the detailed ugly truth of how female slaves were dehumanized, objectified, sexualized and violently beaten to submission, in addition to various images of violence against enslaved female through the eyes of Northup and McQueen.

“Racist exploitation of black women as workers either in the fields or domestic household was not as dehumanizing and demoralizing as the sexual exploitation. The sexism of colonial white male patriarchs spared black male slaves the humiliation of homosexual rape and other forms of sexual assault” (Hooks, 24). this implies that not only the female slave had to work under the same harsh conditions as men, yet her as a person and a body belonged to her master or owner to do with as he pleases, she lived in constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability; “Those women who did not willingly respond to the sexual overture of masters and overseers were brutalized and punished. Any show of resistance on the part of the enslaved females increased the determination of white owners eager to demonstrate their power.”

This latter show that the white male slave owner wants the female slaves to passively accept any advancement that leads to satisfy his sexual desires, those who accepted and willingly submitted to their masters they will be rewarded, and sadly for those who resisted

any type of advances are seen to be directly challenging their owners and are brutally punished as seen suitable by the owner.

Black activist Angela Davis argued in her book *The Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves* that: "the rape of black female slave was not, as other scholars have suggested, a case of white men satisfying their sexual lust, but was in fact an institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women" (27) She furthermore adds:

In confronting the black woman as adversary in a sexual contest, the master would be subjecting her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctly suited for the female: rape. Given the already terroristic texture of plantation life, it would be as potential victim of rape that the slave woman would be most unguarded. Further, she might be most conveniently manipulated if the master contrived a random system of sorts, by forcing her to pay with her body for foods, diminished severity of treatment, the safety of her children, etc. (11)

It is of importance to acknowledge this issue of rape seemingly of black female and in this case black female slaves; it is undoubtedly overlooked no matter the severity of their situation, bell Hooks argued in her book *ain't I a Woman*: "When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women."

Therefore, this theoretical chapter mostly sought to introduce some critical points needed to provide significant insights related solely to black women's experience during bondage and how it harmed their physical and mental wellbeing, and to also give special attention to their role in the community that was undoubtedly overshadowed due to patriarchal victimization and racial injustice.

Brenda E. Stevenson reported in "12 Years a Slave: Narrative, History, and Film 2014" that: "there was more to these women's lives than their abuse ..., their ability to experience joy in spite of the myriad forms of abuse they suffered, and their strategies of resistance" (03).

Since male roles dominated every area of society from government, law, religion, and every imaginable field, women were left with no choice but to be seen as inferior, powerless and are always treated as a group whose value below men in terms of their intellectual, social, and cultural status, therefore, always looked down upon them.

As a consequence, women across the globe broke out of their silence and began to draw attention to the injustice they have experienced on different levels over the years, being denied the right to own property, to vote, the simplest right of education. These were some of many reasons that caused the emergence of feminism movements that women around the world started to fight for gender and social equality, encouraging women's empowerment to realize their full rights. Although feminism has more than one definition, yet it can be brought down to the core concept of ending: sexism, gender and racial discrimination, and inequality.

Since the term mainly used is feminism, in which it generalizes and joins women around the world who are basically fighting for the same cause namely equality between genders among other things that will be discussed briefly in this paper.

Feminism can be defined as: "an awareness of patrician control, exploitation and oppression of material and ideological levels of women's labor, fertility, and sexuality in the family, at the place of work, and in society in general and conscious action by women and men to transfer the present situation".

According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the history of feminism can be divided into three waves: the first feminist wave was the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries which was the first real political movement for the western world, asking to be socially recognized as human, the second was in the 1960's and 1970's activists focused on the institutions meaning taking a closer look at why were women oppressed and held back , together with the emergence of three types of feminism: mainstream/liberal, radical, and cultural. The third wave extends from 1990's to present day "*History and Theory of Feminism*": where women were freer to express their sexuality, how they spoke, dressed, and acted.

Mary Hawkesworth and Lisa Disch defined feminism in their book: *The Oxford Handbook of Feminism Theory* "feminism theory has flourished as a mode of critical theory that illuminates the limitations of popular assumption about sex, race, sexuality, and gender and offers insight into the social production of complex hierarchies of differences" (2) indicating that regardless of the time or place, all feminism movements lead and promotes equality and fights against oppressive and exploitive systems.

When talking about feminism one must keep in mind that it is based on several concepts which are significant in defining feminists' identity and their development over the years, their values that they fight for including equality and differences, sexism, violence, agency, racism, and patriarchy among many other concepts that were not essential in this study.

One of the main cases that is treated in feminism is equality and differences between men and women, they are used interchangeably, both addressing the issue of women rights and that they should have the same privileges and opportunities and to put an end to oppression and sexism. The latter is any act, word or gesture based on the thought that women are inferior to and unequal to men, which in this case, black women are constantly a target of distress by society.

While violence can be defined as any physical or psychological force that is intended to harm or damage someone or something, according to Iris Marion Young violence is: “the most obvious and visible oppression ... groups who have power often oppressed or humiliated lowered class ... including severe incidents of harassment, intimidation or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating or stigmatizing group members ... all forms of sexual violence and hate crimes are prevalent examples of violent oppression” (1990, 62).

Meanwhile, agency is used alongside the concept freedom that feminist around the world are desperately seeking and is one the foundations in feminism theory that investigate and encourages women’s to gain control of their bodies and lives, and is a an alternative way to rebel against dominating societies.

Moreover, racism is the belief that a certain race is superior to another, like in the case of white and black, and American and African, it also can directly or indirectly exclude people from accessing to certain services, it can be defined as “a form of prejudice that assumes that the members of racial categories have distinctive characteristics and that these differences result in some racial groups being inferior to others. Racism generally includes negative emotional reactions to members of the group, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and racial discrimination against individuals; in some cases it leads to violence” (APA Dictionary of psychology 2023, 100).

Finally, patriarchy is defined by some feminist as “the unequal distribution of power between men and women in certain aspects in our societies” (Alda Facio 01) Meaning that males are seen as supreme in their society while women only have secondary roles in both their homes and community.

Continuing from a feministic lens, since this research attempts to capture and provide possible truths about black women, specifically enslaved women experience and resistance

against challenges, through the slavery era until present day discrimination, and to address the inequalities and injustices some if not all of them had to go through one way or another.

Despite feminism being a movement that fights for women, yet black women were hardly if not at all included, therefore, it is necessary to focus more on the issue of these women closely, through the supporting of black feminism movement, that was used by these said women to make themselves visible and to be acknowledged both from society and white feminists that refused or rather ignored their existence as women and as human beings as Malcolm X said “the most neglected person in America is the black women.”

Amii Larkin Barnard added in “*The Application of Movement: Black Women’s Fight against Race and Gender Ideology 1892, 1920*” that “a person’s gender granted or denied basic freedoms.” (02). this explains years of physical, emotional, and sexual torture that was frequently inflicted upon them without any consideration.

Max Peterson defined black feminism in his article “*The Revolutionary Practice of Black Feminism*” as an: “intellectual, artistic, philosophical, and activist practice grounded in black women’s lived experiences”. This suggest that much like white feminism that excluded black women, black feminism is also a movement that not only fights for social equality, unjustified discrimination, but also calls for more exploration of black people I general and black women specifically since their experience was overshadowed along the way to liberation. Dana Renee Horton added in her dissertation “*12 Years a Slave-Master: gender, genre, and race in post-neo-slave narratives*” to the definition of black feminism “black feminism theory is concerned with how women can gain power despite their limited status” (12).

This ideology behind black feminism movement was to develop a way that could appropriately cater the need of black women and addresses the ways in which race, class, and gender were interconnected in their lives and how they were unrecognized as women,

moreover, “it gives a positive coping mechanism to help them develop positive self-esteem if they are victims of negative influences such as self-objectification”. (Brie Ann Avery, 12)

Besides, black feminism does not fail to address the oppression and of inferiority of both black people and black women’s and their place in society, but, it rather encourages, and voicing their concerns about black women’s visibility that was not acknowledged by the “superior” white community.

Amber-Louse Cara Lascelles confirms in her PhD thesis untitled “*Black Feminism in a Neoliberal World-Resistance in Black Women’s Writing*”: “African American women demanded a voice and fought for space outside of black nationalist macho-sexism and beyond the race and class invisibility of mainstream second-wave, predominantly white, feminist movement” (10).

This statement shows that black feminism movements provided black women opportunities that were not possible centuries ago, it gave them a voice to address their issues, concerns, and their lived experiences that is still at some levels ignored and unacknowledged by the oppressive society which they lived in, along with the lack support these women received from white women.

As well as tackling the topic of misogynoir, a term that specifically refers to various forms of misogyny, prejudice, and hate directed towards black women coupled with racism and sexism, in fact, misogynoir is a term coined by black feminist writer Moya Bailey in 2010 which she defines as “the particular brand of hatred directed at black women in America”, a term that is a blending of concepts that combines the word “misogyny” and the French word for “noir”. Similarly, Trady (2014) confirms that: “Misogynoir focuses on how controlling images, stereotypes, and archetypes are used to harm, oppress, and objectify women” (47).

Yet, in spite of this discrimination and hatred they encounter for speaking up and challenging dominant oppressive society and common ideologies, they stood and fought together for their common cause rather than being silenced, moreover, American scholar, poet, and activist Maya Angelou points out: “you may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes, you may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, -black women will- rise” (154).

This declaration in particular is enough evidence that no matter what these women faced and still are facing and no matter how many times they were told that their experiences are meaningless, they somehow always get back on their feet and continue to resist and survive.

Finally, since this research tries to enable the discovery of how black women are sexualized and objectified generally and in *12 Years a Slave* specifically and how their sexuality and vulnerability doubled their exploitation by men, and oppressed by society. *12 Years a Slave* is the perfect way to achieve these goals since Northup and McQueen gave a chance to their voices and experiences to be heard, making their cause priority and attention it desperately deserves that other scholars, writers, filmmakers fail to address.

Amber N. Mitchell further encourages this cause in stating that “because the majority of these films are centered on African American men, it is their stories that center most general discussion of slavery film; Black women are left at the periphery of public imagery of slavery, as sidekicks” (08). For these reasons, black women are frequently considered inferior by the world, society, men, and white women.

Therefore, *12 Years a Slave* is a great opportunity to recognize the true status of black women, by shedding light on their suffering by a verity of external factors, their resistance, the painful oppressive representation of slavery.

Chapter Two: Analyzing sexual objectification and exploitation in *Twelve Years a Slave*

In this chapter, the researchers ought to address the issue of enslaved women and the matter of their objectification and sexual exploitation in *12 Years of Slave*, both the movie and the novel. The scenes that are related to female characters are chosen for this study based on several types of disturbing physical, emotional abuse, and racial discrimination which were captured during that period of enslavement. These female are Eliza (Adepero Oduye), Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o). This chapter also deals with misogynoir and demonstrating it through the movie, mainly, and the novel.

Although many movies spoke about slavery, racism, African American people, the likes of *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Django unchained*, yet, not many of them directed the real and oblivious cruelty of bondage. Film reviewer Tomris Laffly confirmed that: “the film *12 Years a Slave* may be a great film. It is a report of one man’s experience, but, it represents the suffering and survival of many. It is a correction to the false reports of others”, that will remain a memorable in the American cinematic history.

Through the realistic and detailed cinematographical representation of the psychological trauma, physical torture, and sexual abuse that was forced on them by the slaveholders during the captivity of Northup and McQueen’s directing, moreover, Marta Fernandez Jimeno stated in “*Twelve Years a Slave: slavery through the eyes of Solomon Northup and Steve McQueen*” that “Fortunately, the universe gave Solomon Northup a second opportunity, ... This was what made possible the creation of *Twelve Years a Slave* narrative that relates the miserable life of Solomon under enslavement’s abominations” (09). Besides, “the cinematography and imagery tell the story of American slavery and human suffering in ways that enhance the script” (Thibodeaux 03).

More importantly, since this work centers around black women generally and the matter of their objectification, exploitation, sexual vulnerability and its realistic images in McQueen's adaptation, Thibodeaux further added "McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave* does not shy away from the ugliness of slavery... he captures the disturbing physical and emotional violence inflicted on blacks ... most prominently, McQueen foreground the very real and pervasive pattern of female sexual exploitation on southern plantations" (04).

The latter indicates that Northup's autobiography not only revealed the horrific truth of slavery in America, but he gave special attention to the enslaved women around him which led the director McQueen to choose this story and turn it to a phenomenal visual performance with amazing actors the likes of Chiwetel Ejiofor who stars as Solomon Northup, Adepero Oduye as Eliza, Lupita Nyong'o as Patsey, Michael Fassbender as Edwin Epps, Alfre Woodard as Mistress Shaw, and Sarah Paulson as Mistress Ford. These are the essential characters in this research, and most specifically the female characters, their role in both the movie and the slave community, and the case of their sexual objectification and exploitation just as they were seen as a reproductive machine by slaveholders that saw an opportunity to sexually abuse, rape, and harass these women for both economic benefits and sexual pleasure with no regard to their husband's, children, feelings, or even them being human.

Image 01: Platt- The man who survived.



Jensen supported this in “Searching the silence; finding black women’s resistance to slavery in Antebellum U.S history”, “once slaveholders realized that the reproductive function of the female slave could yield a profit, the manipulation of procreation sexual relations became an integral part of the sexual exploitation of female slaves” (10). Her statement demonstrates that black women, along with being silenced with the use of violence, beaten to submission, raped on a regular basis from a young age by white men and some cases black men.

bell hooks stated about the issue of black women: “rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women. The threat of rape and other physical traumatization inspired terror in the psyches of displaced African female”, she further added: “it was crucial that she be so thoroughly terrorized that she would submit passively to the will of white master, mistress, and their children” (32); therefore, once they are sold off, they become a property and are treated as such, also, with time, they are involved against their will in a sexual relationships with their owners who only saw them as machines for producing

children for profit “black women who were able to produce large numbers of children were prized and valued” (Watson 459). This suggests that black women are only valued for their capability of giving birth and being subjected to their master’s sexual orgies.

Therefore, it is crucial to explore how these images of sexual objectification and exploitation of black women are portrayed in Northup and McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* to help improve their images as sexual beings and more of human beings and dismiss any false representation in American history and to the world, more importantly, to shed light on their issues of oppression they face and to give them the credit they much deserve for their resistance and survival in a cruel racist and sexist environment.

For this purpose, the movie analysis is essential since it delivers exactly what this study needs to achieve its goals; however, for those who have read the book and watched the movie they will definitely notice the difference between them, yet these modifications only added to the beauty and realism of events. Although some scenes can be described to be quite raw that the person watching can feel the agony of the characters, away from the typical rules of the happy slave who will happily serve her/his master, away from portraying black people being barbaric, which McQueen clearly emphasized on, showing that the only barbaric people are white people, kidnapping, selling, enslaving, beating, starving black people along with harassing, raping and exploiting their women, for their own delight.

As a consequence, black women had no right to argue, or to resist these sexual advances from their masters, once they are sold they become their possessions. Therefore, it is vital to define sexual exploitation and objectification of black women. Aubrey defines it as follows: “sexual objectification has been conceptualized as the: separating of a person’s body, body parts, or sexual functions from his or her person, reducing them to the status of mere objects” (qtd. in Avery 04). Meaning that, not only they were enslaved, they also had

been stripped of any human characters and demeaning them to simple objects to satisfy their sexual needs. Gayathri et al further added: “Objectification of Afro-American Women added to the misery” (2769).

Whereas, in “Bridging the gap: sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment,” sexual exploitation is known as “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purpose, including but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of an-other” (04). This indicates that women generally experienced at some point or another constant harassment that eventually leads to sexual abuse and with time, their silent acceptance will lead them to be exploited repeatedly.

Violence is present throughout the film; it is an essential element in this study, since it is frequently performed at different scenes and on different characters, Jasmine Nichole Cobb expressed in: “Directed by himself: Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave*” that: “the presence of violence is the key trope that signifies *12 Years a Slave* as a legitimate portrayal of slavery,” she further explained that: “at times, the violence perpetuated on screen is the result of McQueen’s own fabrication and does not appear in Northup’s account” (341).

Yet, for black women and enslaved black women specifically is a different case, since they had no choice in the matter since they are seen and treated as property, therefore, they are obliged to willingly accept such exploitation and sexual advances from men, and if any sign of resistance will lead to either whipping, beating, starving, or even worst killed which for some of them is considered a greater blessing than living in such conditions in the hands of monsters. Dominique R. Wilson affirmed that: “within the bounds of slavery, masters often felt it was their right to engage in sexual activity with enslaved black women” (124).

Furthermore, it is important to mention that from the beginning of both the novel and the movie women are steadily introduced, starting with Eliza (Adepero Oduye), also known as Dradey. Elisha Berry Mistress who always promised her freedom, she believed that her sexual relationship with him would protect her and her children from sale “she resided with him for nine years, with servants to attend upon her, and provided with every comfort and luxury of life” (*12 Years a Slave* 65). As a result, he had left his wife and daughter in the house they always occupied, to build a new one nearby, where he and Eliza lived and had a daughter named Emily, along with her son Rendell, which obviously caused the jealousy of his wife and daughter “she and Emily had become the object of Mrs. Berry and her daughter’s hatred and dislike” (*12 Years a Slave* 37). Who later on deceived her and secretly sold her before she was set free “the hope of years was blasted in a moment” (*12 Years a Slave* 66).

Image 02: Eliza- Black Motherhood.



According to Northup, Eliza first appeared at the slave pen “the night previous to my departure a woman was brought in, weeping bitterly and leading by the hand a little child. They were Rendell’s mother and half-sister ... the mother also clasped him in her arms, embraced him tenderly, and gazed at him fondly through her tears, calling him by many endearing names” (*12 Years a Slave* 35). After that she was quickly separated from them, when she was sold off to William Ford played by the British artist Benedict Cumberbatch, a plantation owner who Northup described as “a model master, walking uprightly, according to the light of his understanding, and fortunate was the slave who came to his possession. Were all men such as hem slavery would be deprived of more than half its bitterness” (*12 Years a Slave* 63).

Image 03: Master Ford- The noble slaver.



He also bought Platt (Northup), leaving her son and daughter behind, after negotiating with Theophilus Freeman (Paul Giamatti), a cruel slave dealer who refused to allow Eliza and her children to stay together, despite Ford offering him to buy them together saying that he will make a great deal of money of her “I will not sell the girl, there’s heaps’ n piles of money to be made off her. She is a beauty. One of the regular bloods; none of your thick-lipped, bullet headed, cotton picking n***s, my sentimentality stretches the length of a coin” (*Twelve Years a Slave* 30:54-31:11).

Admitting her value as mixed-race that will gain him loads of money in among buyers and in the slave auctions and her racial classifications as a mulattoes, a term of degrading used to describe a daughter or a son of a white men and a black women who had a great worth, “many owners would benefits themselves by a large return by selling pretty girls especially light-skinned ones” (Chaudhary 2022).

Noticeably, there is not much change between Northup’s account and the movie scene, the only difference is the realistic and painful acting since children were frequently taken from their mothers to sell regardless of the protests that never were heard in the presence of greed, and at times they lead to threats of physical punishments “Freeman turned around to her, savagely with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her ... [that] he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred laches” (*12 Years a Slave* 54).

Image 04: Freeman- Greed



After the sale of Platt and Eliza, they were transported to Ford's plantation, where his wife, Mistress Ford, welcomed them under the weeping sounds of Eliza, when she asked her husband the reason behind her crying he answers that she was separated from her children, for a brief second she shows sympathy but it disappears as quickly as it comes, dismissing her cries as if it was nothing while telling her "get something to eat, and some rest, your children will soon be forgotten" (*Twelve Years a Slave* 32:31-32:50). As a consequence, her separation from her children and the grief that comes along with it, caused her to die, Northup mentioned that "she had sunk beneath the weight of excessive grief, her drooping form and hollow cheeks too plainly indicated that she had well-nigh reached the end of her weary road" (*12 Years a Slave* 72); he also added that "she rests in the grave at last, the only place for the poor slave" (*12 Years a Slave* 37).

However, in the movie and before this event of the separation, Platt, Eliza and her children, as well as other slaves, prior to being shipped to Louisiana after they were kidnapped from Washington, once it was night fall and while they were asleep a white man quietly came down the steers and approached Eliza, poking her awake, and as if she knew what was coming she silently stands up to follow him, but just about when they were headed

out a slave named Robert stood up after them in attempt to stop the man from taking her and raping her, unfortunately, his heroic action were put to an end when he was stabbed by the man to death. Later, his corpse was thrown out the ship by Solomon and another man (*Twelve years a slave* 23:27- 25:00). However, this attempt of rape was not mentioned in the novel, and was not mentioned by Northup, it is only included and added in McQueen's adaptation, yet, if a person has not read the novel, she/he would not notice this modification that only provided truthful details.

This attempt is one in many attempts of rape either by force or silent acceptance, yet, this does not make this horrible act acceptable to treat vulnerable women with such monstrosity, Mary Hawkesworth and Lisa Disch expressed that: "as a result of commodification, black bodies were rendered disciplined subjects; beholden to the will of white men" (21). This explains the years of sexual abuse that dates back and throughout the slave era, these degrading acts are either to gain momentary pleasure or are for producing slaves, some if not all had to endured in order to survive, therefore, "during slavery their bodies represented production and reproduction, allowing slave owners to increase their property while satisfying their lust" (Avery 08).

Additionally, black women had no protection against these predators, neither the law nor their husband's since can protect them, Carolyn M. West and Kalimah Johnson stated: "rape laws did not provide equal protection for all women" (02). Therefore, since they had no social equality as white women, they were considered to be an easy target for sexual advances.

Later on, after the attempt of rape, they were led to a new slave pen where at (*Twelve Years a Slave* 28:47) a slave was shown naked, their backsides, breasts, and genitals parts were showing, taking a bath together in the open using only buckets of water and rags to

clean themselves; while Freeman inspected them, and potential buyers kept observing them, with no consideration of their privacy or dignity, this violation of privacy is nothing new to slaves but it generally works as a humiliation and specifically against women to show their vulnerability, hooks confirmed “the nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability” (18).

This serves as an objectification of their body that was used and abused, hooks added in her book *ain't i a woman* that “the area that most clearly reveals the differentiation between the status of male slaves and female slaves is the work area. The black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields; the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault” (22). In this statement, bell hooks summarizes the rule of black women in the slave community, their insignificance to the world, and their oppression in a male dominating society.

The second female character is rather important to this research and is a great example of black women's suffering and the powerlessness in every prospect in the slave community, plantations, and white households. Her story is an illustration of the extreme oppression and physical, verbal, and psychological abuse of black women. Thus, it is important to deeply acknowledge her role to gain in depth understanding of black enslaved women's unfortunate situation during that era. Salamishah Tillet expressed in “I got not comfort in this life”: the increasing importance of Patsey in *12 Years a Slave* that “Patsey is one of the many black women, free and enslaved, featured her beating, nevertheless, has ultimate significance because Northup uses it to make his biggest case against slavery” (03). This confirms her importance to both this research and to the controversial case of slavery and black women's objectification by men, their oppression by society.

Image 05: Patsey- Queen of the field



Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o) is a Kenyan-Mexican actress, who first appeared in *12 Years a Slave* for her role for Patsey for which she received an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress (2013), according to Northup's description "Patsey was slim and straight, she stood erect as the human form is capable of standing. There was an air of loftiness in her movement, that neither labor, nor weariness, nor punishment could destroy. Truly, Patsey was a splendid animal, and were not that bondage had enshrouded her intellect in utter and everlasting darkness ... Patsey was queen of the field" (120). He added that "Patsey is twenty-three, also from Buford's plantation ... brought over to Cuba in a slave ship"(118); However, along the movie, it is noticeable that she had lost any hope of freedom or even in life considering her being a target of both master and mistress Epps.

Northup stated that he first met Patsey when he was sent by Master Ford to Edwin Epps's (Micheal Fassbender) plantation his second owner, described by Northup as "a man whose heart the quality of kindness or of justice is not found. A rough, rude energy ... he is known as a "n**** breaker" ... he look upon a colored man, not as a human being, ... but as

a “chattel personal,” as a mere live property, no better, except in value than his mule or dog” (*12 Years a Slave* 117). This description is quite fitting to his character in the movie, a character which he perfectly played as a drunken sexual obsessed man that lusted after his slave (Patsy), who is most prideful slave owner who took pleasure in breaking their spirit. Film critic, Wesley Morris characterizes Epps as “a lunatic,... with his red beard, drunken sexual appetite, and wretched insecurity, Master Epps chases, demeans, and insults the men and women he calls his property” (*Grantland Magazine* 2013).

Image 06: Master Epps – Ni**** Breaker



However, he justified his acts and harsh ownership that “a man does as he pleases with his property” (*Twelve Years a Slav* 112:26), he was first seen in the movie preaching the slaves using the bible saying “and that servant which knew his Lord’s will... which knew his Lord’s will and prepared not himself... prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.” D’you hear that? Stripes, that ni--- that don’t obey

his lord- that's his master, D'you see? - That there ni**** shall be beaten with many stripes, now many signifies a great many" (*Twelve Years a Slave* 54:45- 55:40). Epps character serves as a representation of some, if not all slaveholders that only saw black people as their property regardless of their gender using religion as an excuse for animalistic behavior and sexual advances using his superior position to do as he pleases.

bell hooks explained in *ain't i a woman* regarding this issue conveying Lydia Marie Child about the status of black women during slavery:

The Negro woman is unprotected either by law or public opinion, she is the property of her master, and her daughters are his property. They are allowed to have no conscientious scruples, no sense of shame, no regard for the feelings of husband, or parent: they must be entirely subservient to the will of their owner on pain of being whipped as near unto death as will comport with his interest or quite to death if it suits his pleasure. (26)

However, while men were only stripped off their masculinity and identity and were subjected to different types of racism and discrimination. Yet, in addition to their miserable life conditions, their inferior role in the society of whites and to their own kind, black women were not even acknowledged as women since they did not fit in the beauty standards and are compared to animals if not treated as such in the first place while white women are portrayed as virtuous and pure "as American white men idealized white womanhood, they sexually assaulted and brutalized black women" (hooks 32).

Going back to the case of Patsey, she first made an appearance in the movie picking cotton among other slaves (*Twelve Years a Slave* 55:44), later on, they were aligned to weight the cotton which they collected, unfortunately for others, they did not reach the needed weight, except for Patsey who reached five hundred and twelve pounds of cotton, making

Epps proudly admire her skills in picking calling her “the queen of the field... born and bred in the field, ni***** among ni***** and God gave her to me” (*Twelve Years a Slave* 57:16-57:19), while she successfully avoided the whip she could not avoid her Master’s lustful eyes, nonetheless, this event is an edition in the movie, but it was lifelike scene which showed the strength of black women who worked alongside men.

The nature of relationship between Master Epps and Patsey, namely the abusive sexual exploiting relationship “McQueen shows Epps sexually obsessed by a comely slave Patsey” (Kellner 30); the first sexual interaction accrued in the movie (*Twelve Years a Slave* 73:00) where after a long day on the planation, at night while the slaves were sleeping, Epps quietly crept inside approaching the sleeping figure of Patsey, and just in the case of Eliza, she as well silently followed him outside with no resistance as if she is used to his nightly visits.

Following this, in the dark he raped her, receiving no reaction from her, not even flinching, staring blankly at the sky, than all of the sudden he started pointlessly hitting and choking her ruthlessly while she gasped for air, before leaving her half naked (75:28); “the rape of Patsey by Edwin Epps is a sharp, perpetual fact and her indifferent but painful submission to his lust inclines him to slap and choke her” (Garrett 12). Hooks supported this stating “the sexism of colonial white male patriarchs spared black male slaves the humiliation of homosexual rape and other forms of sexual assault” (24), this statement is a clear indication of the position of black women as female, their gender and inferior place in society caused them to vulnerable to any harassment and given the barbaric nature of slavery at the time, rape was frequent act against them, Northup adds “the enslaved victim of lust and hate” (*12 Years a Slave* 120).

This case of rape that is defined as “completed or attempted unwanted vaginal, oral, or penetration achieved through physical force” (West and Johnson 02), was not uncommon between slaves and slaveholders, it especially roots deeply in the US history, and these unwelcomed advances were morally justified since, along with the oppression that included: whipping, sexual abuse, exposure of private parts of their body that was present at every step of the way, not to mention verbal abuse and degrading name calling throughout the movie, the frequent use of the n- word, film critic Wesley Morris expressed regarding the excessive use of the n- word “you sometimes think the n- word has lost its power to appall, and yet every time it is used in *12 Years a Slave* as an appellation, a title, or a matter of fact- it hurts.

Image 07: Mrs. Epps- envious women



In addition to misfortunate treatment the enslaved women received from men, they were also a non-stop target of terrorization by the Mistresses, caused by the jealousy, exactly like the situation of Patsy and Mistress Epps “in the case of Patsy, Mrs. Epps really hated her because her husband liked, loved, and was sexually interested in Patsy. She saw her as

the cause of her family disharmony” (Simarmata, 04). In McQueen’s version, Mrs. Epps and Patsey’s first characters encounter when the drunken Epps made the slave dance among them was Patsey in his house, while Platt played the violin, when all of a sudden Mrs. Epps advanced Patsey where she noticed her husband staring at her, she picked a heavy bottle of glass and threw it toward her head, making her fall to the ground bleeding in pain.

Right after that incident she demanded her husband to sell her or she will leave him “sell her, sell the ni****” (*Twelve Years a Slave* 60:33), where he obviously refused, making her even angrier, which led to the second violent that was similar to this, except that she scratched her with her nails, when she falsely accused Patsey of glaring at her; “Simultaneously, white planter’s wives were socially conditioned to remain publically silent in the face of their husband’s betrayal and abuse; hence they often executed their anger on the black slave, further rendering the black body an object to be claimed by others to enact their will upon” (Hawkesworth, Disch, 21), this explains exactly the case of Mrs. Epps and Patsey who was a victim caught in crossfire.

Additionally, “not only did slave women have to deal with the advances of their masters, they also had to deal with the retaliation of their mistresses; Since planter’s wives were unable to address the problem directly, they often took out their aggression and anger on the object of their husband’s attention” (38). Yet Northup described Mrs. Epps that she “was not naturally such an evil women, after all she was possessed of the devil, jealousy, it is true, but aside from that, there was in her character to admire... She was kind to all of us but Patsey”, (*12 Years a Slave* 126). He later added “the jealousy and hatred of Mistress Epps made the daily life of her young and agile slave completely miserable” (*12 Years a Slave* 159).

For these reasons, some slaves tend to escape the plantation, and others to end their lives which for them was more merciful than having to suffer the life of slavery and the frequent rape, similarly, Patsey at some point lost the will to continue her life “in response to these repeated attacks, a distraught Patsey turns to Solomon, not for protection, but for mercy” (Tillet, 359).

Therefore, she asked Platt to end her suffering or what she called “an act of kindness”, and that she “had no comfort in this life” (*Twelve Years a Slave* 79:55); further instructing him “end my life, take my body to the margin of the swamp, take me by the throat, hold me low in the water until I still and went out of life, and berry me in a lonely place alone” (*Twelve Years a Slave* 79:20); adding “do what I got no strength to do myself” (80:38), her desperation openly evident in her words, especially after the whipping she received, Northup described as “the most cruel whipping that I ever was doomed to witness- one I can never recall with any other emotion than that of horror- was inflicted on the unfortunate Patsey” (*12 Years a Slave* 159).

This dreadful event accrued when Patsey went to the neighboring planation of Mr. Shaw, leaving a furious drunk Epps behind, upon her return she encountered him waiting for her “Patsey found her master in a fearful rage on her return” (160), where he kept yelling at her and accusing her of escaping while she kept her quit “she finally, however, drew herself up proudly and in a spirit of indignation boldly denied his charges”, declaring that “Missus don’t give me soap to wash with, and she does the rest- and you why, I went to Harriet’s to get a piece” (*Twelve Years a Slave* 160)

Upon hearing that, Mrs. Epps ordered her husband to whip her, so that the other slaves would continue to fear him, after a few seconds of hesitation he ordered his workers to strip her of her clothes and to be strapped to the poste naked, however, he ordered Platt to

whip her threatening him that he will receive a worst punishment if he refused “ you’ll strike her, you’ll strike her until the flesh and meat and blood flow or I’ll kill every ni**** in my sight (*Twelve Years a Slave* 110:30).

Image 08: the suffering



There Platt started striking her back while Mr. Epps and his wife watched the flash and blood on her back flow to the ground “Mistress Epps stood on the piazza among her children, gazing on the scene with air of heartless satisfaction” (*12 Years a Slave* 161), however, he could not continue such harsh whipping, he stopped, where Epps took over, and whipped her to his heart content.

Lucy Stimpson described the scene in her dissertation *History Unchained: an Analysis of the Representation of Violence, Women and Whiteness in Twenty-First Century Enslavement Films*:

The audience is then forced to watch each lash that Northup must strike onto Patsey's bonded body, until she is inches from death. Through each whip, blood sprays and Patsey groans uncontrollably, she becomes increasingly breathless. Northup ceases to look at the torture he is causing, for [him] the agony becomes too extreme he refuses to continue. Epps angrily takes over; expressing pleasure through each lash, until Patsey falls to the ground [he] then throws the blood-soaked whip and leaves. The scene quickly changes to Patsey lying face down on a table; the camera solely concentrates on her brutalized back and details every single gash. (06)

The use of violence in this scene is quite detailed, but this does not make unrealistic since violence is a method to tame women and make them submit and is the core element of slavery, Hooks confirms "female slaves were beaten as harshly as male slaves, observers of the slave experience claim that it was common on a plantation; to see a black female stripped naked, tied to a stake, and whipped with a hard saw or a club" (23).

Patsey's whipping scene is as realistic as it can get, and at times is uncomfortable to watch but nonetheless, this was what made admirable to see a black women survive such whipping, Thibodeaux voiced that "Patsey, [is] perhaps the real breakout star of this film, endures years of rape and humiliation at the hands of the drunken Louisiana slaveholder Mr. Epps and his diabolically jealous wife" (04); in contrast he described Epps as "by far one of the least likeable character in this drama: outspoken, uncaring, self-righteous, and ruthless in his treatment of Patsey" (04), yet it is interesting to note that the real Mr. Epps in Northup's memoir is much crueler than the character played by Michael Fassbender.

Lastly, although black people suffered a great deal of racism, discrimination, awful treatment in the hands of Americans, yet black women dealt with even greater hardships throughout history, since, not only had to fight against racial discrimination, but also against gender discrimination, which made them a target of constant sexual abuse and harassment, not to mention living in an oppressive, patriarchy, and a sexist society.

Stella Rose expressed in *Black Feminist Spirit against Racism and Sexism as Reflected in Sula* that “black women face two kinds of oppression, a racist world and a sexist black community, black women struggle both as black women for their rights to be equal to black men, and as black American people for anti-racism and rights to be equal to white people” (02). Therefore, Northrup managed to present the role of women in the slave community history, while McQueen successfully accomplished this task through screen play, great cinematography, outstanding characters and realistic scenes. Washington Post film critic Ann Hornaday stated regarding the movie *12 Years a Slave* “intense, unflinching, bold in its simplicity and radical in its images, sounds and staging. 12 years a slave in many ways is defining epic so many have longed for to examine ... it works in its emotional power precisely because it is so elegantly constructed from the inside out.”

General Conclusion

Sexual objectification and exploitation of black women during the bondage of Solomon Northup in *12 Years a Slave* and its movie adaptation by Steve McQueen provided an additional realistic depth of slavery and defeated any false claims that the movie industry keeps feeding and promoting to the world regarding black women.

Therefore, by viewing and analyzing both the novel and the movie, it was clear that McQueen went into detail about black women in *12 Years a Slave*, in contrast to Northup who did mention them and described some of them, yet the modifications that McQueen added did not fail to present the distressing experience of these women and did not neglect their issue, unlike other movies that only focus and give credit to men.

Consequently, black women are seen mostly as helpless sexual objects with no identity and no voice, as in the case of the females in *12 Years a Slave* who were constantly terrorized by the men in their society, inhuman masters, not to mention white women, namely the wives of the plantation owners who history portrays them as pure in contrast to black women. Yet, in Northup's account he made sure that his readers know the abuse of black slave women was not always by the hand of men, but at times, by the hands of jealous mistresses who directed their hatred and frustration toward those slaves, who were only a victim in those unfortunate situations.

Being a victim of sexual, physical, verbal abuse for centuries caused by racial prejudice, discrimination, and white supremacist led black women to silently suffer the oppression and sexism, specifically since they had no protection by the law, which ultimately resulted in their objectification and exploitation.

However, through screen play, McQueen, using Northup's memoir, assisted his audience in exposing the dark history of slavery in America, together with the characters who did an excellent job delivering the events that accrued through that period. Most importantly,

not to neglect the female slaves, giving special attention to their issue that many scholars, writers, and filmmakers fail to address or address it however they see fit, yet, admirably McQueen's dedication in making this masterpiece clearly shows through the realistic flow of the scenes.

Finally, this study denies any negative depiction of black women as sexual beings, and encourages similar authentic representation of black women, to recognize their value as women away from any racial and sexist ideologies.

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الملخص

هذا البحث يهدف الى تسليط الضوء على قضية النساء السود, خاصة المحرومات, و المستغلات في رواية دافيد ويلسون 12 عاما من العبودية 1853, كما ورد عن سولومان نورثاب, مجموع مع مشاهد من الفيلم الذي صنع من طرف دافيد ويلسون 2013. الحكاية التي تتحدث عن عبد سابق امضى فترة من الزمن تقدر باثنا عشر عاما تحت العبودية, حيث تم تخديره, واختطافه, وبيعه لأسياد مختلفين الى غاية ان تم انقاذه في 1853. خلال تلك الفترة, نورثاب تحدث عن سوء المعاملة التي تعرض لها من الضرب, و الجلد والشتم, ايضا تحدث عن الرجال والنساء اللواتي عملن جنبا الى جنب مع الرجال في مجتمع العبيد. مع ذلك, من المثير للاهتمام ان نلاحظ انهن تعرضن و جربن شتى انواع الصدمات النفسية المرعبة, سلطة الرجال, وكذلك الى الاعتداءات الجسدية والجنسية بما انهم يرون ككائنات شهوانية. مع ذلك, هن فقط ضحية تحيز جنسي واستغلالي من طرف الرجال البيض والسود, لذلك, من المهم الملاحظة والاقرار بشجاعة تلك النساء في مواجهة المعاملة غير منصفة و عديمة الشفقة من اجل النجاة و من اجل التعبير وايصال صوتهن و حكاياتهن بدلا من اسكاتهن او تجاهلهم من طرف المجتمع و البيئة التي يتحكم بها الذكور, كذلك لتشجيع و الهام نساء العالم للدفاع عن انفسهن والقتال من اجل حقوقهن و صرف اي صور سلبية عن النساء السود.