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Northup's Resistance Towards Racial Discrimination in Twelve Years a Slave

Ramat Hasan¹, Tahir²

¹Universitas Islam Makassar, Indonesia

²Universitas Islam Makassar, Indonesia

Email : rahmat.hasan970@gmail.com

Abstract

This research is sociological literary research and focuses on Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism which sees the literary work as the reflection of the sociological background and condition of the society of the author. Afterward, the researcher also sees the literary work as a social document that reflects the situation when the literary work was produced. Therefore, this research aims to find: 1. Forms of racial discrimination experienced by Solomon Northup as it is shown in *Twelve Years a Slave*; 2. How the phenomena of slavery in America during the Pre-Civil War Period significantly plays a prominent part as shown in *Twelve Years a Slave*. The researcher found the forms of racial discrimination toward Solomon Northup and other African-American slaves namely prejudice, discrimination, segregation, and violence. Furthermore, the researcher found that the phenomenon of slavery significantly plays a prominent part in the writing of *Twelve Years a Slave*. The characteristic of the Pre-Civil War, the economic features, the lifestyles of the north and south, and the rise of the abolitionist movement were all considered to be the aspects that link the society and the writing progress of *Twelve Years a Slave*.

Keywords: Winton, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Racial Discrimination, Slavery

Introduction

Racism which refers to negative action toward inferior people may be caused by the emergence of some races who regard their groups as the best group. One factor, people usually use to determine the superiority is the color of their skin. People with white skin color believe that they are the best product of human evolution. As the result, they consider their races as superior than other. This judgment is supported by the emergence of Charles Darwin's book *The Origin of Species* (1859). In this book, Darwin stated that a man's body structure is the evolution of animals. He also stated that every race has a different process of evolution. Some races were chosen by the God to be favored races that have a good process of evolution. Furthermore, this statement influences the relationship between human being in term of history, politics and social (Lynch, 1998:9).

It is stated that racism shown is the overarching societal paradigm that tolerates, accepts, and reinforces racial inequalities, and is associated with racially unequal opportunities for children to learn and thrive. Racial inequalities result in the discriminatory treatment of people of minority status. According to Crenshaw (2000:58), racism, combined with equal opportunity mythology, provides a rationalization for racial oppression, making it difficult for white people to see the black situation as illegitimate or unnecessary. In short, racism is a treatment of one race who considers his race as superior and other races as inferior.

Throughout the history of the United States, the dominant white culture has decided and controlled a social hierarchy that has been both overtly and covertly biased against the African American minority population. In today's technologically advanced society, media and technology heavily contribute to knowledge that shapes the general population's views. Because of their social influence and privilege, the dominant culture has the opportunity to tailor the exposure of the general population within the United States to maintain a sense of cultural homeostasis, where the dominant White culture is seen as superior in nature compared to the inferior messages displayed about other racial and ethnic minority populations (Maier, 2003:4).

Slavery has been of significant importance in American history. During the antebellum period, slavery undergirded the economy of the United States, dominated politics and eventually led to the war between the north and south, after the Civil War (1861-1865), the legacy left behind of slavery continued to influence American history, from the Reconstruction era of the twentieth century.

Twelve Years a Slave is a memoir which is written as a narrative bibliography by Solomon Northup. The memoir takes "New York" as the setting and written based on the own experience of Solomon Northup who was kidnapped and sold in slavery for twelve years long. The memoir shows the practice of slavery which is involving racism treatment which is done by American white people toward African American Slave.

The memoir presents Solomon Northup, the male main character, as the father of African American family with two children. He lives as a freeman with a great career as a violinist. One day, Solomon met two men who introduced as Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton. They confessed as people who interest to his playing. They offer him to have a free vacation during two weeks in Washington. Unfortunately, Solomon was deceived. He did not get any vacation, but he was sold as a slave. He also was forced to change his name as Platt. During twelve years, he lived as a slave of some white people employer. Racism practice could not be avoided by him, some treatments such as discrimination, prejudice and segregation was experienced by him.

The term racism is one of important discussion in the field of sociology, because racism is one humanity phenomenon occurs among society. Furthermore, the researcher argues that genetic structuralism approach is the appropriate method to analyze the racial discrimination in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*.

According to Kurniawan (2012), literary work is a reflection of condition, value and social life that influences the author. The author portrays the society in accordance with his view and ideology. Therefore, the relation between literary work and society is mediated by the author. Even though the mediation may be imaginative, basically it still represents

the social condition. In other words, the sociological approach is the way seeing literature as the reflection of the sociological condition of society in real life. In hence, the approach used in this study is genetic structuralism.

Literature Review

1. Sociology of Literature

The sociology of literature is a specialized area of study which focuses its attention upon the relation between a literary work and the social structure in which it is created. It reveals that the existence of a literary creation has the determined social situations. As there is a reciprocal relationship between a literary phenomena and social structure, sociological study of literature proves very useful to understand the socioeconomic situations, political issues, the world view and creativity of the writers, the system of the social and political organizations, the relations between certain thoughts and cultural configurations in which they occur and determinants of a literary work. Sociology as the science of social relations studies the society and gets its subject matter from different sources, literature being one of them (Faruk, 2013:5)

2. Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism

Genetic Structuralism was developed by Lucien Goldmann in 1960s. It talks about the relationship between literary works and society. Goldmann believes that a literary work is a structure. This structure is not static, but as a product of structure progress and restructure process conducted by the society where the literary works were created. It means that literary work is a structure that formed as the result of historical process. Goldmann's theory affirms that the texts are based on transindividual subject who becomes a part of certain class. Genetic Structuralism includes genetic factors in the literary works. Genetic means the origins of literary works. The factors are about the author and the historical background of the author's works. In addition, this theory also includes the social structure in the study that makes this theory dominant in a certain period. Consequently, Goldmann's theory relates to the human's creation and the social condition in certain time. From that statement, it can be concluded that a study of literary work cannot be separated from the totality of life of people and its socio historical relationship (Goldman, 1977: 13).

a. World View

Literary works express the relationship between social class or a certain social group and the environment. As the social group who have the same social background, the member of collective subject have the same experience and the way of thinking about their surrounding environment and how to make a better balance in relation to their environment. Those facts will make them unite as a certain social group and make them different from the other social group. It is usually called as a worldview.

b. Human act

Human produce fact as the result of the relation between human and world surrounding their life. The social structure and the literary works are connected by worldview. To find world view, human fact becomes the important part to get social fact to form social structure. Goldman said that human fact is a basic of Genetic Structuralism. It

happens because “Genetic” here means where the literary work was born. Human fact is the social history where the literary work was written. It refers to the social fact depicted in the literary work. It is the result of human behavior (Goldmann, 1980:70).

c. Transindividual Subject

Transindividual subject is the subject who surpasses the individuals, who acts due to the collective aspiration. Likewise, great literary works are also considered as social facts created by the transindividual subjects. Transindividual is collective subject that becomes part of certain society. It means that the authors write such kind of literary works as an individual person but what they write represents a certain social group. Collective subject is the subject of the paradigm to the subject of social facts (historical). (Goldmann, 1980:79). This subject was also referred to the subject of transindividual.

d. Significant Structure

The interaction and the relationship between human and the environment can cause structuring process. Structuring is the process of structure formation as the result of human interrelationship to the surrounding environment. The social condition surrounding the author will influence the author’s ideology and it will influence her works. It happens because of the homological relationship between the structure of the society and the structure of literary work. It means that the structure of the literary work and the structure of society are influenced by human’s behavior.

Research Method

This research is categorized as a descriptive and qualitative research. As a formulation to analyzing this research, the researcher uses sociology theory with Lucien Goldmann’s genetic structuralism approach. This research puts the focus in observing the forms of racial and discrimination, and how the phenomenon of slavery in America during the Pre-Civil War Period significantly plays a prominent part in Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*. The data are presented in descriptive qualitative method.

The sources of the data are divided into two types: primary data and secondary data. The primary data are the significant structure or the facts and the information about racial discriminations in the memoir *Twelve Years A Slave* by Solomon Northup. The secondary data are some information about the used theory and approach, socio-historical context about the condition of American society, and the history of racial discrimination from books, internet, articles, journals, and previous researches. The type of data is qualitative data. It can be gotten from the quotation in the memoir, theory, books and the other sources.

The data collection processes are done through some steps. First, the researcher reads the memoir closely and comprehensively. Second, the researcher reads the memoir again to get the suitable topics and discussions that can be analyzed. Afterwards, the researcher marks the need data to be classified. Then, adding related information about racial discrimination in 18th to 19th century in America from several articles, books, and journals. The last, the researcher emphasizes those data to be used to answer the formulated research questions.

The Researcher uses sociology of literature with genetic structuralism in analyzing the memoir *Twelve Years a Slave*. The analysis focuses on the forms racial discrimination which depicted in the memoir then connects it with the racial discrimination and phenomena of slavery toward African-American in America in 18th to 19th centuries which influenced the Pre-Civil War Period as described in the memoir. Then, the researcher observes the data thoroughly. The entire data then studied and analyzed to get the connection with each other and also the deep understanding of the data and the connections. In analyzing the data, the researcher uses genetic structuralism by Lucien Goldmann. Finally, the researcher gained the data in relation to racial discrimination toward Solomon Northup in his memoir *Twelve Years a Slave*. The last, the researcher draws the conclusion of the research.

Findings and Discussion

1. The Forms of Racial Discriminations experienced by Solomon Northup

a. Prejudice

The first form of racial discrimination toward Solomon Northup is prejudice. It is described as negative state toward other people from different races. Prejudice is often given by white people to the colored people. Prejudice is frequently motivated by the hate of white people toward colored people. They may give the prejudice without any reasonable cause. Prejudice is commonly the result of generalization of current group. The perception of every individual is often seen from the general perception toward his group. The form of prejudice in this narrative can be seen in this following part:

Finding he could not quite me, he flew into a towering passion. With blasphemous oaths, he called me a black liar, a runaway from Georgia, and every other profane and vulgar epithet that the most indecent fancy could conceive (44).

As a colored person who is kidnapped to be a slave, Solomon is forced to receive his new identity as slave. But, he cannot do it. He asserts that he is no man's slave. He declares that he is a freeman from Saratoga who has a wife and three children who are also free. He also says that his name is actually Solomon Northup, not Platt as they know him. When he tries to give this truth, James H. Burch who is a slave-dealer who has owned him, Burch give him a variety of bad designation toward Solomon. Solomon is regarded as a black liar and may other negative appellations.

Furthermore, the appellation as a liar is not given to Solomon once. He often receives this appellation from his master. Another evidence of getting prejudice as a liar is showed as follow:

You are not planning that down enough, he said. It is just even with the line, I replied. You're the liar, he exclaimed passionately. (132)

This occurrence happens when Solomon work for master Tibeats. The work of Solomon is never satisfied for Tibeats. When Solomon is asked to work in the field, Tibeats says that Solomon make a fault in the manner of planning. Thinking that he has done a proper work, he tries to assist his self by explain his work. Unfortunately, Tibeats never accept any reason from his slave. Finally, Tibeats gives a judgment that Solomon is a liar.

There are other forms of prejudice that are given by white people toward Solomon Northup. One of them is being called as a devil of nigger as told in the following quotation:

More than once I heard it said that Platt Ford, now Platt Tibeats, a slave's name changes with his change of master was a devil of a nigger. But I was destined to make a still further noise, as will presently be seen, throughout the little world of Bayou Boeuf. (127).

This prejudice is given by Master Tibeats to Solomon. This negative prejudice is given by Tibeats since he never respect the work of their colored slaves. Solomon is regarded as a slave who often makes some faults in the work. According to Tibeats, Solomon is a breaker. Therefore, he gives this appellation to Solomon.

b. Discrimination

One of the discrimination toward colored people is done through a compulsion to admit the falsehood that is created by white people. The human right of free colored people is often seized by white people. The evidence of this condition may be seen as follow:

I replied that I was sick, and inquired the cause of my imprisonment. He answered that I was his slave, that he had bought me, and that he was about to send me to New-Orleans. I asserted, aloud and boldly, that I was free man. A resident of Saratoga, where I had a wife and children, who were also free, and that my name was Northup. I complained bitterly of the strange treatment I had received, and threatened, upon my liberation, to have satisfaction for the wrong. He denied that I was free, and with an emphatic oath, declared that I came from Georgia. Again and again I asserted I was no man's slave, and insisted upon his taking off my chains at once. (43).

Solomon who is sold to a slave-dealer which is known as James H. Burch finds himself is not a free man anymore. Burch informs him that he has bought him and will bring him to new-Orleans, where he will work as a slave. His asserting that he is a free man is denied by Burch. Besides, Burch also says that Solomon is a slave from Georgia. The liberty that is owned by Solomon is not trusted by Burch. His voice is also not listened at all. However, Solomon is forced to follow their game. Nothing can be done accept receiving the torture from them. This occurrence is the beginning of Solomon's journey as a slave.

During his period of being a slave, Solomon also experiences a condition where he is sick, but his master does not give him any kind of medicine or time for having a rest:

Finally, in September, when the busy season of cotton picking was at hand, I was unable to leave my cabin. Up to this time I had received no medicine, nor any attention from my master or mistress. The old cook visited me occasionally, preparing me corn-coffee, and sometimes boiling a bit of bacon, when I had grown too feeble to accomplish it myself. (177)

Working hard in the plantation gives negative impact to Solomon's health. Unfortunately, this condition cannot change the treatment that is given by his master. He is not given any medicine and more attention from the master and mistress. The only one who cares about his health is a cook who is also a slave. This condition is one kind of discrimination toward Solomon, because he does not accept any human treatment from white people.

Another form of discrimination toward Solomon is getting a coming of treason from white people. It is occurred in the plantation of Epps:

"Well," he continued, "Armsby told me to-day the devil was among my niggers, that I had one that needed close watching or he would run away, and when I axed him why, he said you come over to Shaw's, and waked him up in the night, and wanted him to carry a letter to Marksville. What have you got to say to that, ha?" (234)

Armsby is a white person who wants to be an overseer in Epp's plantation. During his presence, he has a good attitude toward Solomon. He pays good attention to him. His good attitude makes Solomon puts his believe in him. He tells his long story of being a slave. Moreover, Solomon asks Armsby to help him sending a letter to his family or friends. Armsby convince him that he will send it. Unexpectedly, Armsby is a traitor. He tells Epps about Solomon's plan. Knowing it, Epps is automatically becoming angry. He comes to Solomon and releases his angry.

c. Segregation

The third form of racial discrimination toward Solomon Northup in *Twelve Years as a Slave* that is analyzed by the researcher is segregation. Segregation refers to some kinds of spatial and public facilities separation. White people built a great separation between them and the colored people who work for them as their slaves. Colored people who are regarded as inferior are often not given any proper and comfort facilities from their masters. While the masters who are white people family stay in the luxurious house which is commonly mentioned as the great house, the slaves stay in the nasty cabin without any reasonable facilities. The existence of this kind of segregation reflected in the memoir as follows:

An iron-bound door led into an adjoining cell, or vault, wholly destitute of windows, or any means of admitting light. The furniture of the room in which I was, consisted of the wooden bench on which I sat, an old-fashioned, dirty box stove, and besides these, in either cell. There was neither bed, nor blanket, nor any other thing whatever. (41)

Solomon Northup who is deceived by Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton finds his self after his unconsciousness in the strange room which is not comfortable at all. Solomon Northup who is actually kidnapped to be a slave is placed in a bad room which is actually is a cell without bed, blanket or any other proper facilities. The two kidnappers do not care about himself who is in the sick condition. Solomon who ought to get a good nursing to recover his sickness does not get it at all. In contrast, he gets a big trouble from that brutal treatment.

The suffering of colored people is never satisfies white people. The sense of humanity never comes to their mind and heart. When they give those colored man facilities, the facilities are not different from the facilities given for animal. This condition is revealed as follow:

At night, ray, Williams, and the boy, slept in the loft of the shed, while I was locked in the cell. Finally we were each provided with blankets, such as are used upon horses-the only bedding I was allowed to have for twelve years afterwards. (49).

In the slave pen, Solomon is a person who has a potential to break the secret that he is a free man who is kidnapped by Merrill and Abram. Because of this possibility, Solomon is treated more carefully. While other slaves are placed together in shed, Solomon is placed in the cell. In this place, they are still treated in the inhuman way. A day when Solomon and other slaves still in the slave pen, they are supplies blanket as facility for them. Unfortunately, the blanket is not a good one. It is a blanket which is used upon their horse.

The segregated place is not only given to Solomon in the slave pen in Washington. It is also given to him during his time becoming a slave. He and other slaves are placed in the separated place with their master. They are placed in the cabin while their masters stay in their marvelous house which is commonly mentioned as the great house. The following quotation is one of the evidence:

The weaving-house we were erecting stood in the orchard a few rods from the residence of Chapin, or the "great house," as it was called. (108)

Through this quotation, Solomon shows us that the master has a residence that is commonly mentioned as the, great house. This kind of house is not available for the slave except the cooks or slave houses who are permitted to work in this house. Other slaves who work in the plantation are only able to observe this house from their cabin or plantation. From this, we can see unfair separation between master and slave that is built by white people.

d. Violence

The first kind of violence which is experienced by Solomon Northup is physical violence. Physical violence refers to the action of causing physical suffering of person.

The pain in my head had subsided in a measure, but I was very faint and weak. I was sitting upon a low bench, made of rough boards, and without coat or hat. I was handcuffed. Around my ankles also was a pair of heavy fetters. One end of chain was fastened to a large ring in the floor, the other to the fetters on my ankles. (38)

The first physical violence which is experienced by Solomon Northup is in the kidnapping place. Solomon finds his self in the strange room in the suffer condition. Solomon does not know anything about it. He cannot find Merrill and Brown who bring him to Washington. After getting his consciousness, he starts to understand that he is deceived by those two strangers. He is kidnapped and tortured in that room. He cannot move his body because of some fetters which restrain him. Through this quotation, Solomon shows us that white people may deceive colored people and kidnap them to be slave. White people like Merrill and Brown do not care about the human right that belongs to colored people. They think that they can do whatever they want to do. Solomon who is in the beginning invited by them to play violin does not find any occasion to play. He is only invited to visit some places until he finds his self being imprisoned and realizes that he is deceived.

Psychological violence is experienced by Solomon Northup through some threats which are given by his masters. Threat is given by masters to their slave s to grow their pursuance to their masters.

The first threat that is experienced by Solomon Northup is given to force him confessing that he is a slave:

He swore that he would either conquer or kill me. (46)

Solomon is forced to confess as a slave in the slave pen in Washington. He is tortured by physical violence by Radburn who is slave dealer. However, Solomon does not want to do it. As the result, Radburn continue to torture him and gives a threat to kill him. Getting this threaten does not make Solomon giving up to defend his liberty. Solomon cannot be compelled at all. However, Solomon's decision of being silence does not make Radburn has any sense of humanity. He constantly forbids him to tell his true identity as a free man:

In rather a patronizing and confidential manner, he gave it to me as his advice, that the less I said on that subject, the better it would be for me. (46).

The advice that is given to Solomon actually refers to a threat that Solomon's life will be safe if he does not tell other people that he is a free man.

2. Slavery during the Pre-Civil War Period significantly shapes Solomon Northup and the writing of *Twelve Years a Slave*.

e. The Characteristic of the Pre-Civil War

The pre-civil war period was among the most chaotic in American history, a time of significant changes that took place as the United States came of age. During these years, from 1820 to 1861 the nation was transformed from an underdeveloped nation of farmers and frontiersmen into an urbanized economic powerhouse. As the industrialized North and the agricultural South grew further apart, five major trends dominated American economic, social and political life during this period.

In the same period, slavery was the famous word and the perfect job for the Americans southerners. Thus, slaves were kidnapped and sold to the plantations of the south, because in 1850s, the cotton plantations were very profitable. Slaves were treated like animals, they were beaten until death if they did not respect their owners, and also they were the statue and the symbol of their owners. In this period some African American slaves started to search and fight for their freedom.

f. Economic Features

At the time, the Northern America established projects in order to attract people with capabilities and knowledge to duplicate the European industry, while Britain put laws that forbade anyone to knowledge of its mechanicals from immigrating and sharing that knowledge. America countered that by paying bounties to any capable person, with that, the new industry spread across America, from New England to Massachusetts.

In the 1820's, instead of weaving at local farms, power looms were included in the mills, and specialized trained employees were set to run the mills, who were mainly young women. At the same time, a population shift from farms to cities had already begun, the promise of better income in factory jobs accelerated that movement giving rise to the concept of wage labour, which gradually began to overtake previous forms of labour, such

as apprenticeship and indentured servitude, family labour and slavery in industrialized areas. These advances included all kinds of industries and thus production was effective.

In the South, cotton plantations were very profitable, at least until overplanting leached most of the nutrients from the soil, the industrial progress that occurred in the North and in Britain increased the reclaim for cotton fibres. The plantation owners were able to obtain large tracts of land for little money after the Indian Removal Act was passed in 1830. As the cotton culture spread westward, slavery strengthened its hold on the south. The demand for slaves was greatest in the Deep South, and the upper south sold its slaves "down the river" at ever higher prices.

Majority of people declared previously, as much archive that the southerners were requesting All the more slaves will partake, energizes the cotton ranches. That's the reason the high society sold a huge number from claiming slaves who thus might make sold of the different plantations owners. These enlargements required a large amount of slave force, since slaves would not demand a raise of wages and their progeny insured a labour source that would last for generations. This process led to an increase in the slave prices, the farmers, thus, found a source of wealth in their slaves and started selling slaves farther to the south and west, which created a new sign of prestige and political power.

3. Northern and Southern Lifestyles

a. Life in the South

The lifestyle of southern Americans had its own share in history, as historians struggled to bring the truth out of that reality that even at the time was difficult to understand. The world that was abiding by their own rules was divided into three classes, which are: Independent farmers. They are those who owned their own farms, which they worked, themselves with the family members. Most of independent farmers owned slaves, as their crops production gained more success, they began to expand their lands and buy more slaves. Accordingly, they increased their status in society and even became part of the elite (the upper-class men).

b. Life in the North

Life in the north was modern and civilized because of factories and industries like big cities such as New York, was the largest city in America, also it contained 800,000 inhabitants. The most of northerners lived in the urban areas, their life was easier and more successful than the life in south as well as in transportations, politics, education, business and medicines. It is more important details about lifestyle of the north, the idea of being on time represented a significant change in life style of most city dwellers, and since the north was the most urbanized section of the country, being on time became characteristics of northern life. It is asserted that many northerners were very organized in their life. The idea of being punctual was the most important element that changed them to intellectuals and more current than southerners.

4. Abolitionists Movement (Anti-Slavery Movement).

The American abolitionist movement sprung before and during the civil war in order to finish slavery in America. It covered many societies, churches, and members from both the South and the North, and even though it was fragmented, it was a success. The

members included politicians, freed African Americans, white Americans and many others, despite the variations in their anti-Slavery ideologies. They formed a galvanizing power to eradicate slavery.

When the war was over, and the north had won, the number of human casualties was enormous, 620,000 men died in the battlefield. The north counted about 364,000 dead soldiers, including 37,000 black men who fought for their freedom. Countless men died during the war, not in the battlefield, but the conditions of the war were getting so bad that many soldiers died of disease or minor injuries that were not treated well which led to a more horrible death. Since most of the battles took place in the south, many fields and crops plantations were destroyed, the countryside was muddled by the passage of armies from both sides, and so most livestock was dead.

Conclusion

Prejudice is given by white people to their colored slave without any reasonable cause. Solomon Northup and other African-American slaves often accept some prejudice that is caused by the absence of satisfaction from their masters. Discrimination is form of racism that dominates the negative treatment of white people toward the colored slave. The discrimination is done to Solomon Northup through the seizing of human right, prohibition of using original and his family name, giving exceed hours of work, careless about his health, treating him like property and animal, prohibition of having reading and writing skill, coming a treason and prohibition of choose the proper work. Segregation is given by white people to their colored slaves by building a great separation between master and slaves. Solomon Northup's masters live in their luxurious house that is commonly called as great house, while he and his fellow slaves live in the nasty cabin without any proper facilities. Violence is experienced by Solomon Northup in the form of physical and psychological violence. Physical violence is experienced by him in the form hanging, lashing, being and cuffing. Psychological violence is experienced by him by accepting some verbal and word threats from his masters.

Another finding that the researcher found is that the phenomenon of slavery significantly plays a prominent part in the writing of *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup. The characteristic of the Pre-Civil War, the economic features, the lifestyles of north and south, and the rise of the abolitionist movement were all considered to be the aspects that link the society and the writing progress of *Twelve Years a Slave*. With these aspects, it is no doubt that literature is the media chosen by Solomon Northup to contrast his captivity condition to the society at the time.

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