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## TESTIMONIAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE MOVIE *TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE*

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**Abstract:**-*Twelve Years a Slave* is a historical drama movie and an adaptation of the memoir of Solomon Northup, a slave. His struggle for survival and its consequent emancipation forms the main theme of the memoir and the movie version. This article probes into the historical relevance of testimony in portraying the trauma. Testimony, its importance and how the traumatic incidents in the life of Solomon are represented in the movie are discussed. It also deals with the importance of memories in the representation of trauma with reference to the movie.

**Keywords:**Testimonial Representations , Twelve Years a Slave ,historical drama .

### INTRODUCTION

Traumatic events includes those that turn down the assimilation of immediate interpretation or integration into consciousness. Dori Laub refers to trauma as an event without a witness because of the inassimilable nature of the traumatic event leading to the absence of traces. Shoshana Felman's notion of testimony educate readers to open their ears, hearts and minds to the voices of the dead as they continue to echo through the voices of the surviving witnesses. This dimension of testimony in traumatic studies stressing the importance of voicing and listening trauma is pointed out by Cathy Caruth as she describes the notion of "voice" in relation to the Freudian concepts of repetition, compulsion and latency in trauma. Her reading is on Freud's analysis of a scene from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* in chapter three of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For Caruth, 'the voice of his beloved addresses him and, in this address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated" (*Unclaimed 3*).

Establishing a powerful bond between those bodies violently erased in disasters and their representations through monuments, narratives, and testimonies is akin to giving form and body to a void created by the traumatic event. Literary as well as visual texts can take people back into the heart of trauma by restoring an invincible bond between voice and body, trauma and corporeality. The movie *Twelve Years a slave*, with powerful and haunting incidents, can be considered as a bodily representation of the testimony of Solomon Northup, a freeborn African-American, forced into slavery and to the traumatic twelve years as a slave in America.

The notion of testimony at the core of this issue orbits around a paradox: the need for a witness to the historical events that are constituted by the impossibility of their straightforward integration into consciousness. Testimony, in this context, is not simply a form of eyewitness account or historical recording but "it is an effort to make accessible the historical traumas that have moulded in the past, but remain outside the possession of, twentieth- and twenty-first-century historical consciousness" (newyorker.com)

One of the most traumatic incidents in the movie is the hanging of Solomon Northup

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(Chiwetel Ejiofor) from a tree with a rope around his neck allowing only one foot to touch the muddy ground. He is left to droop himself like this similar to the swinging of a pendulum, between life and destruction, while the other slaves go on with their work as if everything is normal in a Louisiana plantation in the eighteen-forties. Solomon has to face this punishment for standing up for himself against an overseer. That's essentially his situation for a dozen long years. Another such scene in *Twelve Years A Slave*, is where Patsey, starring Lupita Nyong'o, makes an impassioned plea towards the sadistic plantation owner Edwin Epps regarding the need for her to remain clean and that was the reason for her to go out of the farm. There is a mixture of brittleness and power in her face, and a will of defiance despite his sudden brutality. All these events in the movie is based on a true story, which Northup told in a book of the same title, published in 1853. So the movie can be read as a visual narration of the testimony. Northup in his memoir says "Having been born a freeman, and more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free state, and having at the end of the time being kidnapped and sold into slavery" (Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* 1). In the movie, director McQueen tries to reflect the horror of the cruelties that human beings did to his fellow men as witnessed by Northup betrayed by base everyday cruelty. The movie leaves before us a testimonial representation of thousands who never knew freedom, who were never able to tell their stories for future generations.

All the incidents overwhelmed by memories, which are neither composed into cognition nor constructed as knowledge, forms the core of testimony, as Felman stated "a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory" (*Testimony* 10). The movie version of *Twelve Years a Slave* is also filled with bits of memories that Solomon had throughout his twelve years such as his thoughts about his family, Solomon's encounters with other slaves and slave owners, the tortures that he suffered.

The essence of testimony is historical and that its intention is to record events and to recount facts of a historical event. Felman makes an exploration into narrative and testimony by analyzing Camus' *The Plague*; "Since the testimony dwells on historicity as a relationship to death, and since the act of writing... as an act of bearing witness to the trauma of survival. (*Testimony* 12). The survival of Northup struggling with the pathetic condition and his happy reunion with his earlier lost family helps him testimonize his past as a slave. Northup is fortunate to have survived, while, as the film says by the last part, there are those who perished as slaves, who are not able to write their testimonies.

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