

# Проблема самоидентичности в афроамериканских классических историях рабов, написанных авторами-женщинами

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## The Problem of Self-identity in Slave Narratives Written by African American Women

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### Аннотация

Статья посвящена анализу афроамериканских классических историй рабов, написанных авторами-женщинами, и рассмотрению вопросов конструирования идентичности. Идентичность героинь этих текстов формируется под влиянием семьи и культурного наследия всей общины. Авторы уделяют особое внимание способам борьбы темнокожих невольниц за собственное достоинство.

### Abstract

The article is dedicated to the analysis of African American slave narratives written by women and the consideration of questions of identity formation. The identity of the female personages of these texts is influenced by and formed with the help of their families and the cultural

legacy of the whole community. The authors pay special attention to the means of struggle of black women slaves for human dignity.

**Ключевые слова:** афро-американская литература, истории рабов, идентичность, община.

**Keywords:** African American literature, slave narratives, identity, community.

Slave narratives are autobiographical accounts either told to white editors or written by runaway or freed slaves (late 18<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). Only 16 out of over 130 slave narratives were written by women, and most of them were free northerners [3].

In our research we try to reveal the ways of identity formation described in the life accounts of M. Prince (1831), Sojourner Truth (1850), H. Jacobs



(1861), L. Picquet (1861), E. Keckley (1868), H. Tubman (1869).

### Basic oppositions

Slave narratives became the first works in African American literature where the main emphasis was laid on the problem of identity and on the description of survival strategies which helped slaves not to lose ethnic identity. To figure out this theme, the authors considered the corresponding binary oppositions. A slave's life was based on the opposition «white – black», rooted in the symbolic meaning of color. According to it white color was associated with purity of consciousness and conscience while the black one was often equaled to low desires and immorality.

The opposition «white – black» also implied social differences, the latter were implemented in everyday life of plantations. These distinctions can be described through the oppositions «owner – slave» and «person – slave (animal)». Practically in all considered texts the words «brutalize» and «downtrodden» are used for the description of the treatment of slaves and their condition: bringing the slave down to the level of an animal was performed systematically. Prince, e.g., describes herself as her owners' pet [7].

### Sources of self-identification

Slaves lost many sources of self-identification already at birth. Only a few knew the exact date of their birth or something about their kin, first of all, fathers, as most often white owners fathered slave children and then just hushed this fact up. Slave children were taken away from mothers already in infancy to prevent any bonds. The name and race were the only sources of self-identification for slaves.

Even gender identity was shattered as slaveholders made children slaves of both sexes go half naked. In case of any examination of «property» both male and female slaves were subjected to the same humiliating procedure.

Thus, slavery represented an extreme social situation which deprived slaves of multiple identities and endowed them with only one – that of a slave.

### Preserving identity

Women writers try to reconsider these oppositions and to prove that some slaves didn't put up with the lot imposed by slaveholders, but maintained their identity (both personal, and ethnic).

Jacobs tries to deconstruct the central opposition «white – black» by a simple juxtaposition of adjectives «white» and «black» for the description of one person: «*This white-faced, black-hearted brother came near us...*» [2, p. 81]. Thus she is eager to show that skin color doesn't define the inner self and such an opposition is wrong.

The opposition «person – slave (animal)» in women's slave narratives, to our mind, not so relevant as much attention is paid in these works to the subject of home, family life, i.e., to human experiences. Women writers show that either parents or some relatives told the children about sold family members, thereby keeping alive the memory and strengthening family bonds. In case of mother's death or parting with her, her image can appear in daughter's visions and guide her (Jacobs and Picquet), or some kind woman can replace mother (Prince).

Faith and community become other sources of self-identification that help to struggle against the identity of slave. Most often mothers teach their children to appeal to God, as he is not a punishing judge, but a merciful savior for them. That



perception of God determines a special manner of communicating with him, as with someone close, with a friend («*She talked to God as **familiarly** as if he had been a creature like herself...*»[6, p. 61]; «*She <...> prayed for them, with the strange **familiarity** of communion with God...*» [1, p. 77]). Faith unites all community members, it is a means of sharing grief and taking on part of a burden of other person.

Only slave narratives written by women describe how slaves' faith helps them to change for the better. Thinking of God and trying to live by his laws, Picquet breaks off the relationship with a white, as she understands its sinfulness[5], Sojourner Truth decides to go to people and to convert them, Tubman works as a conductor of Underground Railroad helping runaways to get to free states. Thus, women writers show that faith contributes to slaves' spiritual growth.

Besides, women always develop in relations, emotional intimacy influences their psychological state therefore community is very important for them. So, the main character in Jacobs's narrative warns her friends of the forthcoming search and helps one of them to escape. Some women writers describe rituals which originate from African traditions and unite all community members, e.g., «spiritual shuffle»[1].

Besides, all the authors constantly quote spirituals which were a source of self-expression for the whole community, and also a means of passing and preserving cultural memory. These songs were also used by slaves as signals during flight.

The reasons underlying escape of female characters are most often connected with thoughts about, first of all, children, but also brothers and sisters. The importance of emotional connection with others is emphasized in the names which are chosen by protagonists, e.g.,

Picquet and Keckley take their husbands' surnames.

The described commitment of the characters to their family and community made them look upon themselves as members of an ethnic group already in slavery. So, freedom for them is not the time of finding ethnic identity, but the means of its assertion. Keckley raises money for those Blacks who were left destitute during the Civil War and came to Washington[4], Tubman works as a nurse in hospitals for black soldiers.

Thus, in slave narratives written by African American women we see female characters who are representatives of community. They manage to create their own identity in slavery under the influence of their family and cultural heritage of the whole community. To preserve self-esteem and dignity they decide to escape.

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