

Locating the Self: An Analysis of Booker T. Washington's "Up from Slavery"

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Abstract

"Up from Slavery" (1901) is an autobiography of the American freedom fighter and educator Booker T. Washington and stretches over forty years of his life, from slave to schoolmaster to the face of southern race relations. This paper looks at Washington's emphasis on moral integrity, economic self-sufficiency, and vocational education as essential elements in African Americans' identity development and uplift in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One of the major themes that this autobiography highlights is "the feeling of becoming your own person." Such a feeling can be denoted as "locating the self in oneself." Washington's life as a slave illustrates how the black body, which has always been utilized as an object for white people's advantage, suppresses the individual self. The slaves were in continuous battle to find out their identity and to recognize themselves among the citizens of America. The childhood of Washington describes the thoughts of a young boy who does not even know about his ancestry and family records. But he has come under heavy fire for his accommodationist views, which were best expressed in the Atlanta Exposition Address and may have reinforced racial subordination while postponing the fight for civil rights. This analysis delves into the complexities of Washington's public and private personas, highlighting the strategic nature of his leadership and the on-going debate surrounding his legacy. While Washington's contributions to education and economic empowerment are undeniable, the limitations of his philosophy underscore the need for a holistic approach that includes political advocacy and systemic change. "Up from Slavery" serves as both a personal testament and a historical document, capturing the resilience and aspirations of African Americans in their on-going quest for identity, respect, and equality.

Key words: Booker T. Washington, African American, slaves, self, struggle, identity

Introduction:

Booker T. Washington, in his autobiography "Up from Slavery," portrays his journey in identifying himself from childhood days to emerging as a significant leader and educator of the African-American community. He has portrayed the harsh reality of the poverty and misery that the community endured in the latter half of the 1800s in America. Washington made it very evident that education, economic growth, and, above all, a shift in white people's perceptions of black people are the only ways that African Americans may regain their dignity and sense of self. His unwavering pursuit of knowledge brought him to the Hampton Institute, where he eventually founded the Tuskegee Institute. By then, he would have come to understand that African Americans must become economically independent, which can only be done by acquiring real-world skills through vocational training. Washington always held that achieving economic self-sufficiency was the first step in achieving equality and allowing slaves to distinguish themselves from other people [1]. After being a towering figure among African Americans, Washington advocated for racial harmony and the gradual progress of the slaves. Even if there were several African-American leaders who believed in more aggressive ways of combating racial injustice, Washington focused on the improvement of the self through education and the advancement of the economic standard of the slaves. Washington gained the support of many white leaders and benefactors as a result of his accommodating attitude toward black-white interactions. These individuals then significantly increased the funding for the Tuskegee Institute and many other African-American universities [2]. Washington continues to have a significant and remarkable influence on the education of the slaves and the preservation of their civil rights, notwithstanding the controversy that surrounded his leadership [3]. Here, we can say that Washington's quest for identity and self-location was originated since his childhood when he was completely unaware of his ancestry and it prolonged until he became the President of the Tuskegee Institute.

One prevalent theme in the narrative of Booker T. Washington's "Up from Slavery" is that of locating the self or the search for identity. Throughout Washington's life journey from his childhood to his being a historical figure after becoming a towering African-American educator and an advisor to various U.S. Presidents essentially summarizes the struggle for self-identification and social recognition affronted by the African-Americans during the latter part of 19th and earlier part of 20th centuries [4]. His challenge was not personal but for the entire African – American community which has experienced a marked transition from slavery to freedom and the subsequent limitations arising from Reconstruction and Jim Crow [5]. Washington's description provides compelling insight into how education, economic independence, and moral integrity are viewed as pathways to a secure and respectful identity in a racially biased society. An elaborative account of Washington's journey from enslavement to prominence as an educator and leader can be traced in this autobiography. Washington's narrative not only describes his personal evolution, but also reflects his broader perspective on African-American identity and self-empowerment during Reconstruction. This article examines how Washington's self – concept developed and is expressed in his autobiography, early life, educational achievements and public presence. [6]

Literature Review:

Washington's perception of self-identification has been severely impacted by his early experiences as a slave and his eventual attainment of freedom. His early life struggles, as described in "Up from Slavery," exemplify the difficulties the African - Americans were confronting in asserting their humanity and dignity. According to Harlan, "physical survival and moral clarity of struggle" had a sincere repercussion on his later reinforcement on education in industries and pragmatic skills. Harlan noted that Washington reinforced on pragmatic education was a well thought response to the socioeconomic challenges African-American encountered in the post-Civil War South, where they were kept away from political and economic power [7]. The journey of Washington to the Hampton Institute was indeed a crucial moment in his personality. This is where he was deeply impressed with a system of education that imbibed both moral and vocational training. Raymond W. Smock notes the academic curriculum at Hampton was curated to cater to self-discipline and self-respect in its students [8]. These were essentials, Washington was sure, that could bring in respect and economic stability for the African - Americans. A direct application of these principles was Washington's founding of the Tuskegee Institute. The Institute's focus on industrial education was intended to provide African - Americans with the skills necessary to

achieve economic independence, a key component of Washington's vision for black identity [9]. His belief was that the African – Americans could leave a mark in the society through racial and economic stability by mastering trades and demonstrating economic productivity.

The public profile of Washington was intentionally raised to strike a compromise between the objectives of the African – American community and the presuppositions of the American Whites. His famous speech in 1895 to the Atlanta Exposition, mostly referred to as the “Atlanta Compromise” excellently encapsulated his philosophy as an accommodationist. In his speech, Washington focussed on a vision of racial improvement through vocational training and attaining economic stability and self-sufficiency. He precisely suggested that the community was destined to accept social segregation within a short span of time [10]. W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* highlighted a rudimentary traction in the thought process of the African Americans about the means and ends of racial progress. He also opined that the strategy adopted by Washington was inappropriately accommodative but had induced racial subjugation [11]. This tension can also be explored in Norrell's biography, “Up from History,” in which he acknowledges the prudent elements of Washington’s public image. At the same time, he has also recognised the limitations that have been imposed due to his accommodationist attitude [12]. Besides being of historical in nature, “Up from Slavery” is a meditative work of art in which Washington is found to be continuously wrestling with his identity and for finding a place in the society. He often reflects on the moral lessons he learned at Hampton and the difficulties of running an institution of higher learning in a highly segregated community. Washington's story is different by virtue of hard work, self-control and moral rectitude. In recounting his experiences, Washington repeatedly emphasizes on the importance of character and integrity, both as individual virtues and as collective virtues necessary for the development of the African-American race. His narrative strategy depicts his humble beginnings and gradual rise, thus framing his life story as an example of the possibilities that exist in American society despite racial inequality [13].

The continuous legacy for the search of identity by Booker T. Washington has still had relevance, especially when this subject becomes the topic of debate over importance of education for social change and the measures to be taken for racial equality. Modern day academicians and critics have often questioned about the strategy being adopted by Washington because there were other activists like Du Bois who have formulated more overt and effective activities [14]. Washington has always been criticised for concentrating more on vocational training and economic independence rather than addressing the system of racial discrimination which was the most prevalent socio political reality of that time [15]. However, his ideas can be evidently discerned at the present time when we find a huge importance is given to vocational training and character development while designing the educational curriculum [16]. The activities of Washington throughout his life are examples of the adversities through which he tried to search his identity within a society which was socially discriminated. His activities also emphasize the limitations, challenges and opportunities faced by the African Americans in the search of honour and identity [17].

Development of Thought:

Booker T. Washington experienced slavery at a very early age and this has shaped his views on slavery. He was into slavery since his birth in 1856 and he was also unknown about his parentage. He spent his childhood with many tribulations without any sort of formal school education. Despite these sufferings, he has always focussed on self- improvement and perseverance in order to gain self-esteem. His struggle among all these adversities illustrates his search for identity during an era in which there was enslavement and social inequalities. His mother inculcates in him a strong belief about the transformational power of knowledge in the midst of barbarism and oppression. This belief paves the way for his huge emphasis in future on education which serves as a means of self – liberation. A key aspect of Washington's self-determination is its commitment to education and self-help. After the Civil War, when Washington was attending the Hampton Institute, he concentrated on the notions of career development and independence [18]. The Tuskegee Institute, established in 1881 by Washington, is a profound example of his belief that industrial and vocational educational education can only uplift the African Americans in their standard of living and ultimately can bring them an identity in the society [19]. The Institute was designed to provide African Americans with practical skills with a vision of economic self-reliance as a path

to individual and community empowerment [20]. His narrative, "Up from Slavery", highlights the constraints and victories of establishing an institution from nothing and also reflects the evolution of his sense of self both as an educator and as a leader.

Washington's identity is largely influenced by his public image and his associations with enormous cultural predominance. His support for the segregation policies of the Atlanta Compromise (1895) and his advocacy for vocational training demonstrated a calculated approach to racial improvement. His reflections at the most coveted Atlanta Exposition, emphasized on vocational training over political and social equality which were not allowed to slaves at that time. He believed that only by vocational training, the economic condition of the African Americans could be improved [21]. Even if this approach is highly criticized by his contemporaries like Du Bois for apparent acceptance of segregation, it highlights Washington's delicate understanding of his self-identity in a racially segregated society [22]. The autobiography of Washington presents an evolving sense of self that is moulded by personal acquisitions, educational progress and public commitments. His concept of self-recognition is dynamic as it is constantly redefined by means of his personal experiences and from the feedbacks he received from his contemporaries [23]. Washington's reflections on his success reveal the underlying assumptions behind the development of the Tuskegee Institute and its impact on the education, perseverance, and practical success of African Americans. His ability of navigating the constraints of society while following his vision gives a clear picture of the dynamic nature of his self-identity.

Critical Analysis:

Washington was optimistic that the African – Americans could elevate their position in the society and could attract respect from the Whites only by the acquisition of practical skills. This belief forced him for advocating in favour of vocational training which could serve as a means to achieve economic independence. This point of view was again influenced by the prevalent socio economic conditions after Reconstruction South, where the African American community not only experienced a widespread prejudice but also found little opportunity in everything [24]. Critics have viewed the strategy of Washington being excessively restrictive which has restricted the scopes that African Americans might achieve even if vocational training has offered an immediate solution to their economic disadvantages by providing a means of livelihood. Do Bois, one of the contemporary and critic of Washington, has apparently criticized the focus of Washington on industrial education in his book "The Souls of Black Folk". He argued that the approach of Washington has neglected the importance of higher education the germination of artistic and intellectual abilities among the African Americans as these components were highly essential for the development of their leadership as well as potential. The "Talented Tenth" concept of Du Bois put an emphasis on the requirement of highly educated elites who could have the capability to lead the African American race for the demand of civil rights and for their active participation in the American society [25]. Hence, the importance on vocational training can be considered as a realistic but an ultimate conventional strategy that could not challenge the racial barriers and the structural inequalities existing at that time. This is clearly hinted in Washington's most memorable pronouncement, the Atlanta Exposition Address (1895), where he has encouraged the community to concentrate more on economic independence through vocational training rather than engaging themselves in agitation for civil rights. However, Washington strongly believed that social progress would ultimately be followed by economic stability [26]. We could find a mixed reaction from the critics on this method of Washington. Some would say that it was a pragmatic technique which could protect the African Americans from the severe oppression by the Whites during an era of unbearable racial violence and expatriation. On the other hand, others would say that the position of Washington, tolerating unfair treatment and segregation, has contributed to establish a system of racial subordination. August Meier pointed out that the actions of Washington could be interpreted as surrendering to white demands for black subordination, which could have delayed the struggle for civil rights [27]. The Atlanta Compromise has been criticised for forcing the African Americans to emphasize on economic growth at the cost of openly facing the racial inequities that restricted them from achieving complete citizenship.

The public character of Washington has often been considered to be complicated for the two-fold role he played – as a mediator of the black community and as an advocate for their education. His stature of being the

“Great Accommodator” resulted from his capability to evade conflict with the white establishments and at the same time helping his community to fight legal battle against racial discrimination and deprivation. The efficacies of the techniques adopted by Washington and his sincere intentions have been a topic of debate among the researchers for the dual role [28]. As an accommodationist, he could raise support and funding for the educational institution the Tuskegee Institute through which vocational training and essential education could be provided to the African Americans. On the other hand, this approach has made him very much controversial as he was accused of being too much moderate towards the existing racist system. While considering the academic inheritance of Washington, Ellen Lagemann emphasizes that the challenges and limitations that Washington encountered while harmonising his public speech with his personal efforts in achieving enormous radical changes [29]. This duality in his public character has paved the way for diverse interpretations of his legacy. Some critics view him as a true leader working within the limitations of that time whereas others would consider him as conservative who has hindered the advancement of the most essential agenda of civil rights. Washington’s autobiography “Up from Slavery” can be considered as a promising mechanism for the creation of self-identity that would value righteousness, perseverance and above all independence. This narrative of Washington provides ample possibilities for the African American community amidst severe limitations imposed on them due to racial inequalities. Jennifer Glaser’s examination of the narrative demonstrates that the story of Washington intentionally creates a public image that emphasizes respectability and morality. The idea that only African Americans who embraced particular principles were deserving of advancement has been criticized for the reinforcement of stereotypes in this construction about the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor [30]. Those people who could not meet these standards have been marginalized potentially by this perspective. Similarly, his emphasis on the politics of respect has been criticized for endorsing implicitly the racist view that African Americans required proving their potential to be treated equally [31]. This autobiography is put at risk in validating the racial prejudices and social hierarchies even though it empowers in its message the scope of self-improvement. The approach of Washington has continuously influenced the debates based on the strategies for acquiring racial equality. His continued stress on education and training for achieving economic empowerment has been found in several racial movements and educational reforms which are highly essential for improving the socio-economic status of the marginalized communities. His legacy is assessed frequently by researchers under the lens of current issues related to social justice, education and race. The gravity he has put on vocational training and economic self-sufficiency is always noteworthy but at the same time he should have adopted a more comprehensive strategy which would incorporate a campaign about civil rights and racial discrimination. It can be said that his methods of resolving racial discrimination and lack of political involvement – the two major issues related to racial inequality – were limited. Obviously, Washington’s contributions towards education, training and economic empowerment are indisputable. However, the scope of his fight for complete racial justice had shown clear limitations of his vision. His search for self-identity and for the identity of the community is clearly pictured in his autobiography where he stressed that economic empowerment, which can be achieved through education and vocational training, can bring social identity [32].

Conclusion:

Booker T. Washington’s “Up from Slavery” is an elegant presentation of the quest for identity set against the prevalent social inequalities of African-American history. Washington was strongly criticized for his conservative and accommodationist approach even if his stress on vocational training and economic independence had provided a sensible solution to the problems at that time. It is also said that Washington has deliberately built his image which has been brought to light by the duality of his private and public deeds. The contributions of Washington towards the education and upliftment of the African Americans are obvious, however, they should be judged within the broader context of the struggle for identity and racial equality. The pursuit of quest for identity in the autobiography of Booker T. Washington’s “Up from Slavery” presents a multidimensional understanding of the African-American tribulations during a crucial era in the American history. The life of Booker T. Washington, as delivered in his life story, encapsulates the enormous difficulties and potentials that the community encounters in its quest of identity, social justice, respect and economic advancement amidst a culture of huge racial prejudices. The African Americans, no doubt, were living in a hostile environment and with the active support of Washington, they looked to better their lot with vocational training and making themselves self-

sufficient. Washington could speculate that the Black Americans could be respected and socially recognised only when they won't completely depend financially on the Whites [33]. He could also presume that they could be identified among the mass if they could establish them as a trained workforce. His emphasis on character building is a part of establishing identity. His focus on education, training and hard work was a deliberate response to the extensive racism and socioeconomic inequalities in the post-Reconstruction South. Washington always wanted to create a positive identity for the African Americans, an identity which would be based on moral integrity and respectability. So, he aimed to advance these ideals which would culminate a true identity for the African Americans [34]. However, the accommodationist perspective of Washington, as epitomized in the Atlanta Compromise, attracted significant criticism. W.E.B. Du Bois, a notable critic, opined that the approach of Washington was more conservative and tacitly accepted disenfranchisement and racial segregation. This criticism illustrates the inward tension in the philosophy of Washington: to maintain a balance between pragmatic adaptation and oppressive conditions as well as taking the risk of sustaining these very conditions [35]. The complexity of Washington's leadership can be traced in the duality of his public and private actions. It is also noteworthy that publicly he would advocate for accommodations but privately he supported the legal challenges against racial injustice. This indicates the nuanced strategies adopted by the leaders of African American community for the navigation of a racially stratified society. His stress on the provision of vocational training set the stage for further advancement.

The shortcomings of Washington's strategy drew attention to the need of a comprehensive plan that would incorporate political activism, political inclusion and acquisition of civil rights. His autobiography "Up from Slavery" aptly captures the hardships, tenacity, aspirations and a quest for self-identity at a very critical juncture in the American history [36]. The prominent theme of search for identity can be traced from Washington's journey from bondage to freedom, from ignorance to education and from self-doubt to self-assurance. Washington, through his autobiography, strives to find out the identity of himself and his race amidst the prevailing complexities. He tries to negotiate the strain between his African American lineage and his urge for social improvement, and between his duty towards the black community and his personal aspirations. It can be mentioned here that in this autobiography, the theme of search for identity has brought an ingenious understanding of Washington himself and about his place in the contemporary scenario. He has accepted his identity as an African American but is also aware of the constraints and opportunities involved in it. This narrative provides Washington's message to the community about the importance and necessity of determination, development and self-identity. His approach has ceaselessly motivated the human kind to explore self-identity and reinstate it throughout. It also shows the valuable perspectives of leadership and the varied range of strategies that can be employed during the revolt against racial discrimination. This is a work of art that can be treated as an unmatched depiction of the untiring search for identity, equality and respect. The self-writing of Booker T. Washington constantly arouses the scope for discussions about the best possible ways of affirming self-identity and of transforming the society.

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