

# Analysis of Power Discipline and Subject Resistance in *Twelve Years a Slave* from the Perspective of Foucault's Theory

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**Abstract:** *Twelve Years a Slave* is an autobiographical novel written by Solomon Northup, a freeman from the North, after being abducted and sold to a southern plantation as a slave for Twelve years. In the book, slave owners discipline black slaves by using various means of physical punishment. Most of the black slaves were forced to submit, but a few were still firm and confident and had the courage to resist. The book profoundly exposes not only the miserable lives of black slaves, but also praises the courage to resist repression. Based on Foucault's theory of disciplined power, this paper analyzes the physical, discursive, and spiritual discipline of black slaves by slave owners in *Twelve Years a Slave*, as well as how black slaves resist under the harsh discipline mechanism, which not only indicts the evil of slavery, but also inspires people to stick to their beliefs and have the courage to redeem themselves in the face of difficulties and injustices.

**Keywords:** Michel Foucault, Power Discipline, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Subject Resistance.

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## 1. Introduction

In 19th century, slavery in the United States was not only an economic system of racial oppression, but also a power device that systematically deprived black people of their subjectivity through violence and disciplinary techniques. Sun hui [1] believed that *Twelve Years a Slave* is a picture of life described with the desire for freedom and the pursuit of it, and it is a masterpiece that faces history squarely and contains life philosophy. Traditional researches focus on macroscopic criticism of political and economic structure or humanitarian ethical complaint, but neglects microscopic investigation of the daily operation of power technology.

In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault [2] reveals the transformation of modern power from violent deterrence to micro-discipline. The theory of disciplining society provides a deeply sharp scalpel for deconstructing institutionalized oppression. He pointed out that the core concept of the book is "discipline," starting from the birth process of prison. Foucault elaborated in detail and profoundly as a form of expression of power, from a "representation, dramatic, signifier, public, collective" to a "decentralized, detailed, micro-visual way." Its function is through the control operation of the human body by discipline, various forces the human body continue to conquer, thus strengthening the power of taming human beings. The book unfolds with a fourfold logic: the age of torture, the rationalization of punishment, the system of disciplinary techniques, and the prison society. Its core argumentation points out that modern power internalizes discipline into the recessive law of social operation through the precise weaving of space, time and knowledge, and finally shapes the subject of "tame and useful."

The power institution represented by the slave owners in *Twelve Years a Slave* is actually a productive discipline mechanism, whose basic goal is to train, to cultivate and to produce obedient slaves. Xia Heguo [3] once said that power penetrates into every corner of society through these micro-techniques and means of discipline to ensure its own

operation, and power is everywhere. Based on Foucault's theory of power, this paper interprets the power discipline embodied in this experience and how the protagonist resists it. This kind of resistance is not only individual, but also group and cultural, which provides a good idea for studying how do black individuals and groups resist under the predicament of being disciplined and how contemporary people should deal with difficulties.

## 2. Power Discipline in *Twelve Years a Slave*

Michel Foucault [4] argued that discipline power makes individuals tame and useful by applying precise pressure to their bodies. For slave owners, 100 percent obedience was what they always wanted. But in the case of black slaves, this obedience reduced them to tools of the slave owners, to empty human beings, dead "people" who had completely lost the most basic human ability to think and distinguish. Qi Yanfei [5] pointed out that *Twelve Years a Slave* shows the situation of black people being disciplined by white power into a standardized object without self and personality. Black people are not only watched all the time, they are watched all the way down, making it hard for them to escape. The physical, discursive, and spiritual discipline pervades the Southern plantation.

### 2.1. Physical Discipline

Zhou Riqiong [6] pointed out that the United States is a typical multi-racial and multi-ethnic country. The history of American civilization is the history of multi-racial and multi-ethnic contributions and development history, and it is also the history of the struggle of all races and classes for all men are born equal, especially the actions and movements of black against racial discrimination. According to Foucault, the human body is the central factor in the operation of power relations. Foucault took advantage of the polysemous nature of the word discipline and gave it a new meaning to refer to a special technology of power both the training and surveillance technology of power's intervention in the body, and the means

of producing knowledge. Liu Beicheng [7] pointed out that in *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon was beaten upside down for resisting his overseers, his feet could barely touch the ground, and other slaves were forced to continue working, and no one dared to help. In this scene, flogging is not only a punishment, but also a publicly performed ritual to intimidate other slaves by displaying pain. Creating fear through violence, binding the body to pain, and forcing slaves to internalize “obedience” as a survival instinct. In addition, slaves were required to pick a fixed amount of cotton per day (e.g., Patsy was required to pick 500 pounds per day), and those who failed to meet the quota were flogged, and those who exceeded the quota were suspected of laziness. Supervisors use ledgers to record labor data and translate physical output into quantifiable indicators. By alienating the body into a production machine and depriving it of autonomy. Chen Jingyi, Yang Shuiping [8] once said that the black has always been considered as an instrumental existence, that is, a productive and reproductive tool. Slaves were forced to wear rough uniform linen clothes, compare to the fine clothes of their white masters. Whiplash marks and scars on the body became permanent markers of “slave status.” Through the symbolization of clothing and scars, the class division of “slave-master” is strengthened. The body is transformed into a “text” written by power, a constant reminder of its social status. Wang Xiaochun [9] pointed out that white people think they are superior people, while black slaves are the lowest people, in the eyes of slave owners, slaves are just tools, they have no ideology, and do not know what is freedom and power, even if they are beaten until they cry repeatedly, they are still powerless, at the mercy of the slave owners. MCGUIREE [10] once said that on the one hand, black women are “inhuman” labor tools; on the other hand, they are symbols of desire and carry the reproduction of the plantation, and the triple identity makes it difficult to resist the exploitation brought by the identity. Patsy was sexually assaulted by Epps many times, and his wife was violent because of jealousy. When Epps orders Patsy to strip and be whipped, she sees her body as both a sexual object and a vehicle for her anger. This kind of sexual violence not only destroys women’s bodies, but also ruins their human dignity through humiliation.

Simply put, violent punishment, quantification of labor, and surveillance systems combined to construct a physical prison that the conditioned slaves from muscle to nerve enslavement. Solomon’s eventual escape from the scarred body of his birth is a silent indictment of this disciplinary violence. Slavery created a body by disciplining it to suit its needs, while resistance began with regaining autonomy over the body.

## 2.2. Discursive Discipline

Jin Qianqian [11] pointed out that the dignity of “human beings” was gradually lost with the deprivation of name, loss of privacy and commercialization. Casual sales and the disintegration of family units led to the confusion of cultural identity of black groups, and they lost their right to speak under the mainstream white cultural system, and gradually formed black cultural aphasia.

Michel Foucault’s discursive discipline theory emphasizes how language and discourse are used by power structures to control and regulate individual behavior. In *Twelve Years a Slave*, slavery deprives blacks of their subjectivity and strengthens their subordinate status through systematic discursive strategies. Wang Taoyu [12] believed that after

internalizing the white slavery, religion, and art system, the black group has a slavish thinking, and some of them have become the gatekeeper of the mainstream discourse system and are insensitive to the situation of others. After Northup was kidnapped, slave traders forcibly changed his name to “Pratt.” This act not only erased his free identity, but also forced him to accept the new identity of “slave” through the reconstruction of language signs. When Edwin Epps insisted on calling him “Pratt”. The name became a tool to solidify power relations. Though taking away their original names, slaveholders cut off their ties from past, weakened their self-identity, and strengthened their possessable property attributes. Through research, Liu Yi [13] found that the names of slaves were code names in the slave society, and the slave owners or human traffickers could call them whatever they wanted. The names were only dependent on the preferences of the slave owners. As individuals, they could not have names with independent meanings, not to mention the consciousness of individual independence. To foster a sense of loss of independence, attachment, and dependence on the slave owner. White slave owners and supervisors often referred to adult black males as “boy” and “nigger” even when they were older. Epps, for example, disparagingly uses the word “boy” for middle-aged Solomon to deny him the dignity of an adult. This kind of language dehumanizes slaves, solidifies their “inferior” social roles, and naturalizes oppression in everyday conversation.

## 2.3. Spiritual Discipline

Wu Xiuzhen [14] believed that unlike simple and barbaric physical punishment, spiritual discipline is a profound and difficult process. As a slave, changed owners three times, he experienced the hardships and dehumanization of being a slave, not only his own suffering but also the suffering of his fellow blacks. After Solomon was kidnapped, slave traders forced him to deny his real name, family and free identity, and even threatened to “cut out your tongue if you mention New York again.” As he is forced to answer questions under the name “Pratt,” he sinks into self-doubt: “Maybe I was born a slave?” By erasing personal history and severing ties to free identity, slaves were forced to accept the false narrative of being born slaves. Epps, the slave owner, read aloud from *the Bible* before whipping his slaves: “It is God’s will that a servant obey his master!” She also blamed Patsy’s suffering on “her SINS.” He even asked slaves to “thank their masters for their kindness” in their prayers. Xiang Xiaohong [15] has said that the great influence of Christianity on the protagonist Northup makes him a typical example of resistance under black slavery in his work. Epps uses religion as a tool of mind control, packaging the brutality of slavery as a “divine order.” By instilling the idea that obedience is atonement, slaveholders defined resistance as “sacrilege” and caused victims to give up resistance out of fear of eternal punishment. Overseers deliberately sow discord between slaves, reward informants, and spread rumors that “others will betray.” Solomon was nearly lynched for trusting a white carpenter, and became deeply suspicious of all potential helpers, including well-meaning whites. By breaking the bonds of trust between slaves and isolating them into an “all are enemies” state, the will to resist dies. When no documentation could be provided to prove that he was a free man, Solomon faced constant flogging, whose attributes were commodities, imprisoned, bought and sold, trafficked and auctioned. Commodity attributes instantly destroyed social identity that

Solomon had always had, and society was no longer a place on which the collective memory of its community could rest. It seems that the name has changed, but it is a metaphor for the fall of old memories and the crisis of identity, which is also a spiritual discipline.

Despite spiritual discipline's attempts to turn people into "walking dead," Solomon's written account of suffering and Patsy's desperate plea to Solomon to "kill me" are glimmers of resistance.

### 3. The Secret Path of Subject Resistance in *Twelve Years a Slave*

Bao Yaming [16] found that as long as there is a power relationship, there will be the possibility of resistance. Chen Yan, Yang Yan [17] pointed out that although Northup had been living in the North and had been a free man since childhood, he had always had a dream and longed to have a place in the white man's world. Because he believed that all beings are equal, no one is willing to be a humble slave. Unfortunately, the fate is unfair, the kind of him was deceived to the southern plantation to do coolies, despite the adversity, he never gave up the idea of returning to his hometown, his spirit of resistance also affected his black group, his success is also encouraging all suffering black people. The discipline suffered by the slaves in *Twelve Years a Slave* also inspired some resistance.

#### 3.1. Resistance of the Body

In *Twelve Years a Slave*, Patsy's body is both the archetypal victim of discipline and the secret battlefield of resistance to power. Her physical resistance is not presented as a violent struggle, but unfortunately in an extreme oppression, through self-destruction, silence and limited control of the body, to complete the dissolution of disciplinary power. Patsy begs Solomon to kill her, an act that seems negative but is the ultimate rebellion against the slaveholder's body ownership. Epps sees her body as both a sexual resource and a labor force, while Patsy seeks to take possession of her owner through self-destruction, declaring: "My body does not belong to you, even if it means death." Behind the plea for death is a tragic assertion of bodily autonomy—that when the body cannot live freely, it can at least choose to die freely. Huang Tao [18] pointed out that no matter the black women represented by Patsy or the black men represented by Solomon, they have more or less experienced the process from being stared to counter-staring, from the reduction of body consciousness to the gradual awakening of body consciousness under the gaze of white people. The reduction of body consciousness caused them to fall into the dilemma of self-identity and subject construction, and the gradual awakening of body consciousness not only declared the bankruptcy of white people's attempt to discipline black people completely, but also marked the gradual recovery of black subject consciousness.

Patsy's rebellion reveals the brutal dialectics of body politics: slavery seeks to alienate the body as a thing through discipline, but the body always retains the potential to resist. Her scars, silence, and will to die ignite the flame of dignity in the cracks of disciplinary power, proving that even under the most difficult oppression, and the body remains an indestructible bastion of subjectivity.

#### 3.2. Recapture of Discourse

Xu Mingju [19] believed that the damage brought by the slave system to Solomon has long been deeply permeated in the depths of his heart, twelve years of slave life tested his strong will to survive, and he used his wisdom to contend with the slave owner to the end. In *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup's act of writing is at the heart of the revolt that runs through his life as a slave. This kind of resistance is not only the subversion of the knowledge monopoly of the slave owners, but also the reconstruction of the subjectivity erased by the disciplinary power through writing, and the transformation of writing into the secret battlefield of free will. Slaveholders tried to turn Solomon into a tool without history by depriving him of his real name and forbidding reading and writing. But Solomon kept the paper in secret, recording his encounters in writing and even writing letters for help in invisible ink on wooden boards. The essence of this act is to take writing as the anchor point to resist the violence of identity reconstruction—writing becomes the only spiritual link between him and the identity of free man. Jiao Xiaoting [20] pointed out that as a slave, he did not like most black slaves in history as passive, obedient, but chose to work creatively in a hard environment, so that his humble life emitted a meaningful beam of existence. Under the guise of keeping accounts for slave owners, Solomon touched ink and paper and secretly recorded the truth at the edge of the ledger. His memoir *Twelve Years a Slave*, published after the rescue, recaptured the tampered historical interpretation with a first-person narrative. This kind of writing behavior echoes Foucault's theory of words are power when the slave owner monopolizes writing power, Solomon breaks the rules with anti-writing, sublimating the individual suffering into an indictment of the system.

Solomon's writing proves that when disciplining powers try to reduce man to the status of silent things, words are both a secret room to preserve subjectivity and a blade to pierce the iron curtain of oppression. From charcoal letters to memoirs, writing has always been freedom's most tenacious refrain—it allows someone who has been declared non-existent by the system to finally come back into the world as the author.

#### 3.3. The Code Words of Culture

In *Twelve Years a Slave*, music and ritual become the hidden language of slaves' resistance to disciplinary power. In a gesture of seeming obedience, they carry the spiritual energy to break down oppression, and in the cracks of religious hymns, labor songs and instrumental music, they construct an "invisible" system of resistance. Slaves chant spirituals (such as "Roll, Jordan, Roll") in unison under the scorching sun, with lyrics that ostensibly celebrate heavenly salvation but implicitly point to reality "crossing the Jordan River" as a metaphor for escaping across the Mississippi River to a free state. This dual meaning of music not only satisfies the slaveholders' imagination of taming believers, but also conveys a message of resistance through collective chanting. While the overseer reveled in the "piety" of the song, the slaves were negotiating escape plans with the intonation and rhythmic stress as the code words. Solomon was forced to play a happy dance for the slaveholders' feast, but fill it with a mournful melody. The violin was originally an instrument of entertainment discipline imposed by the white, but he transformed the music into a silent indictment by improvising key changes and rhythm delays. When the sound of the fiddle is juxtaposed with the sound of the whip, the

instrument is no longer a prop for the pleasure of the host, but becomes a witness of violence. The tremor of the string forms a cruel counterpoint to the trauma of flesh, revealing the bloody nature behind the elegant civilization. Music here transcends the function of entertainment and becomes an invisible archive of suffering. Slaves gathered late at night to pray, mixing Christian prayers to traditional African rhythms and reconstructing erased cultural identities in the ritual. Patsy secretly kept her mother's shell necklace and reciting tribal songs in the moonlight, private rituals that resisted slaveholders' purging of black history. Group rituals (such as the slow stomping rhythm at funerals) reinforce a sense of belonging through the complicity of body language and counter divide-and-rule discipline strategies. The musical and ritual revolt proved that culture was far more resilient than the discipline of violence predicted. While slaveholders sought to monopolize the power of interpretation with *the Bible* and the whip, slaves reclaimed the weaving power of meaning with notes, rhythms, and rituals, which is an uncompromising tinder of freedom buried in a seemingly tame performance.

### 3.4. Group Bonding

In *Twelve Years a Slave*, the scene in which several slave girls secretly clean Patsy's wounds and apply herbs late at night after she has been whipped by Epps is a glimmer of communal solidarity in the discipline cage. This act went beyond simple physical assistance to become a hidden ritual of resistance under slavery. The slave owners tried to reduce Patsy's body to something that can be destroyed at will through violence, while the female slaves used healing actions to reclaim the dignity of their bodies. They wipe blood with warm water as gently as a mother soothes a baby, in sharp contrast to the day's violent whipping. The choice of herbs also has implications-possibly derived from knowledge of traditional African medicine, suggesting the oppressed's adherence to cultural memory. The healing scene takes place in the slaves' crowded log cabin, a monitored "non-free space" transformed into a temporary shelter at night. The slave girls formed a human barrier to shield Patsy, creating a protective barrier with their bodies. Their whispers "He will go to hell" constitute a curse on the authority of the slaveholder, while silent touches (shaking hands, wiping away tears) rebuild the network of trust destroyed by the discipline power. "Twenty years ago, my back was opened like this," the old slave told of her past abuse as she healed Patsy. The sharing of painful memories transformed the individual trauma into collective history, resisting the systematic erasure of black suffering by slaveholders.

This healing ritual exposes the fatal flaw in disciplining power: it can dominate the flesh, but it cannot extinguish the empathic instinct in human nature. The female slaves' fingertips of herbs and body heat weave an invisible web of resistance in the dark night, allowing Patsy to still touch the temperature of "what makes people human" in despair.

Yuan Xiaowen [21] once said that the main theme of *Twelve Years a Slave* is the desire and pursuit of freedom. Northrup[22] once stated "I want to survive. I will not allow myself to despair. I will stay alive until there is a chance of rescue." This was the spirit that sustained Northrup's struggle against slavery. In the novel, black slaves seem to have an inescapable fate of being enslaved. Just as Epps said, no one can overthrow the slavery system, and black people can never cross the authority of white people. Lu Xiaochuan and Hu Ge [23] pointed out that black slaves could not write, and white

people believed that black slaves could not think and remember without writing, let alone have history and humanity, so black were called slaves. Solomon never gave up his desire for freedom. The revolt in *Twelve Years a Slave* reveals a cruel and hopeful truth: disciplining power can imprison the body, but it cannot extinguish the subject's desire for freedom. Whether it is the dignity in Patsy's scars, the memory in Solomon's words, the baptism of music and violin, or the healing ritual in the night, which prove that the light of the humanity still shines in the darkest hour. This resistance not only a historical narrative, but also a warning to the contemporary world, where variants of discipline such as racism and alienation of labor still exist, the hidden resistance of the weak through the culture, memory and group identity has always been a sharp sword piercing the iron curtain of oppression.

## 4. Conclusion

In *Twelve Years a Slave*, disciplining power represented by the slave owners used various techniques to control and manage the slaves' body and spirit, so that they could obey and voluntarily act in accordance with the wishes of the slave owners. As far as slaveholders were concerned, slaves could only submit without complaint to bring more profit to their own industry. But in the case of black, this obedience reduced them to tools of the slave owners, to empty human beings, dead people who had completely lost the most basic human ability to think and distinguish. Physical discipline is more likely to paralyze and demoralize a man than spiritual discipline. But the black community never gives up, in the face of slavery and injustice, like them, they must adhere to the desire for freedom in their hearts, dare to resist the discipline and struggle to achieve physical, discursive and spiritual independence.

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