

**M.A SEMESTER IV**  
**PAPER XIV(C)**  
**UNIT III: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**  
**THE HISTORY OF MARY PRINCE**

Professor Madhu Singh  
Department of English & Modern European Languages  
University of Lucknow

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Of late, the most pressing concern of Comparative literature has been “annexing material first overlooked or unexplored, enlarging the scope, expanding the limits of comparison geographically, disciplinarily, intellectually” and “to transcend Eurocentrism and address the insights of-critical and theoretical-that works from Asia or Africa or elsewhere outside Europe may provide.”(Loriggio 256) Autobiography was one such ignored genre which was not seen favourably as a literary form for a long time. In his 1979 essay, “Autobiography as Defacement”, Paul De Man dismissed autobiography as a genre as it cannot live up to the expectations of literary genres and tends to look slightly “disreputable” and “self-indulgent” and creates “a convergence of aesthetics and history that would be unacceptable”(919). He asserted that autobiography “is not a genre or a mode but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs in some degrees in all texts.”(921) On the contrary, Shapiro(1968) argued against literary cartographers who ignored the existence of this “dark continent of literature” and coloured it in a “toneless black.”(421)Phillipe Lejeune(1975) was instrumental in revising the “intellectual snobbery” of Paul de Man and others including his own as he readily admits. He defined autobiography as “the retrospective record in prose that a real person gives of his or her own being, emphasizing the personal life and in particular the ‘story of life.’” He also formulated the concept of the “autobiographical pact” wherein the author enters into a pact or contract with readers, promising to give a detailed account of his or her life, and of nothing but that life. The best study of autobiography as a genre is Roy Pascal’s “Design and Truth in Autobiography” (1960)which deals with the history and evolution of autobiography as a genre. He contends that autobiography is á review of a life from a particular viewpoint in time - a review in which attention is focused on the self as it interacts with the world... It is not a portrait of self but an interpretation of an evolution of self that is a shaping of the past through selection and emphasis. Thus, autobiography is now well established genre within the discipline of Comparative literature.

It is “a major subject of research and debate, and a site for raising several questions about the construction of the self and its technologies, the nature of the subject, the nature of language, the relationship between the reader and the writer, their relationship with time, and

the way autobiography helps the reader's own self-knowledge of man and the world in general.”(Satchidanandan, 108) It deals with questions of self, experience and representation in culture-specific contexts and from different subject locations. It depicts how the self negotiates between the public and the private, and between individual histories and history at large, in the writing of autobiography.

### THE HISTORY OF MARY PRINCE

Autobiography has remained central to African-American literary culture since their earliest writings published in the West. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, displaced Africans found it critical to acquire the language to help them “enter white debates on the humanity of the Africans and to challenge western European discourses on freedom and race”. They believed that by mastering literacy and the language of their enslavers, they would prove to their oppressors and white sympathisers that people with black skin were as intelligent as other groups. Since then, “the life story has been the most effective forum for defining black selfhood in a racially oppressive world to challenge white hegemony and chattel slavery and search for political and psychological freedom” (McKay 96)

This lecture-note will discuss how Mary Prince's autobiography problematizes memory, trauma, gender, ethnic/racial identity and the relationship to the body, and the connections between the enslaved and the enslavers and the power/hegemonic structures in the Caribbean society.



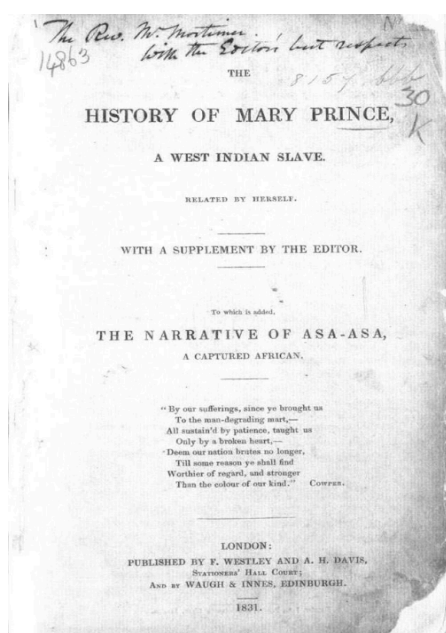
(No images survive of Mary Prince herself, but this is the photo that has often been used to illustrate her story)

From: *The Guardian* (2007)

Read Mary Prince's story "They bought me as a butcher would a calf or a lamb" in *The Guardian* 19 Oct 2007. Click [here](#).

Narrated by Mary Prince, a Caribbean slave, transcribed by Susanna Strickland-Moodie, and edited by Thomas Pringle, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) is an autobiographical narrative, a poignant personal history and a multi-layered political document. Mary Prince was "the first black woman to publish an account of her life in Britain - an account so brutal that few believed it". In her autobiography, she vividly recalls her life in the West Indies, physical and psychological degradation, and her eventual escape in 1828 to England. In her straightforward, often poetic account of immense anguish, she narrates her separation from her husband, and struggle for freedom which inflamed public opinion at a time when stormy debates on abolition were common in both the United States and England. The importance of *Mary Prince* as 'a black Atlantic' text and the first black female autobiography published in England has been widely recognized. The narrated autobiography of Mary Prince republished meticulously in 1987 by Moira Ferguson is an analysis of an ex-slave's incredible struggle for survival.

Here's the link to e-Book of *The History of Mary Prince* from Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17851/17851-h/17851-h.htm>



(The facsimile of 1831 edition of *The History of Mary Prince*)

## THE HISTORY OF MARY PRINCE: A BRIEF OUTLINE

[ This summary is not a substitute for the text. Students are advised to read the text which can be downloaded from the link given above]

Mary Prince was born into slavery on Bermuda around 1788, and suffered a soul shattering experience of being taken away from her family at the tender age of twelve after a relatively happy, innocent childhood and sold off for £38 sterling. As a slave, she was treated brutally by a series of masters on several West Indian islands of Bermuda, Turks Island and eventually Antigua, enduring great hardship and sexual abuse. For years she was forced to work up all day in salt ponds, manufacturing salt which caused sun blisters on her body and painful boils and sores on the legs. In 1828, she was brought from Antigua to England by her then owners, Mr and Mrs John Wood. Slavery was still legal in the West Indies, but no longer in Britain, so once in London, Prince escaped from the Woods and sought assistance from the Anti-Slavery Society. In 1829, she unsuccessfully petitioned parliament for her freedom, so that she could return to her husband, a free slave, in Antigua without finding herself enslaved once again.

In London, Prince dictated her pathetic but remarkable story to Susanna Strickland (later Moodie). Her first person account had an immediate effect on public opinion about the anti-slavery movement. More importantly, the book drew attention to the continuation of slavery in the Caribbean, despite an 1807 Act of Parliament officially ending the slave trade. It inspired two libel actions and ran into three editions in the year of its publication. This powerful call for emancipation remains an extraordinary testament of ill-treatment, suffering and survival of African slaves in the Americas and England.

For more details visit the website: <https://www.maryprince.org>

## TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- a. The transatlantic slave trade and British colonial society in the Caribbean, [the Middle Passage](#), [the Triangular Trade](#), European colonialism, and plantation conditions in the Caribbean, [the Abolitionist Movement in the US](#).

- b. American Slave narratives of the Nineteenth century  
<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html>
- c. Slavery and Women

### OTHER CONTEXTS

- a. Autobiography, Authorship, and Authority: Role of Editors and Amanuensis
- b. *The History* as a Black Atlantic text
- c. Autobiography, Female Body, Subjectivity, Race and Resistance
- d. Autobiography, Testimony, Trauma, Memory

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Please follow the links given above to read the history of the Atlantic slave trade, Slavery and the Abolitionist Movement in the US. The visuals of the following YouTube videos will enhance your understanding of the life and times of slaves in the nineteenth century.



#### YouTube Resources:

##### Listen :

The Atlantic slave trade: Ted-Ed : Duration: 5:38 mins.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NXC4Q\\_4JVg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NXC4Q_4JVg)

Life on a slave ship. 4:14 mins  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmQvofAiZGA>

Slavery and its abolition in the United States. 14:01 mins  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HblWEryxxms>

### GENDER AND SLAVERY

Gender is an ‘indispensable category’ of analysis in exploring slavery in the Americas, highlighting both the dialectics between the enslaved females and their enslavers and ideas about race and slavery. Read this abridged excerpt from the essay “Gender and Slavery” by Kirsten E. Wood in *The Oxford Handbook of Slavery in the Americas(2010)* edited by Mark M Smith and Robert L. Paquette.

## The Gendered Division of Slave Labour

Planters across the Americas forced enslaved women and men to perform exhausting work in the fields with little regard for sex. In the West Indies, slaves were assigned to the first (or “great”), second, or trash gang depending primarily on strength and age or life stage rather than sex. In the United States, planters often measured all slaves against the standard of the “prime” slave. Thus, a strong woman might be a three-quarter hand, while an old man or a pregnant woman might be a half hand. Working in sex-mixed groups did not, however, erase gender. For example, planters typically assigned children of both sexes to the trash gang. Because the trash gang also contained elderly, heavily pregnant, and breastfeeding women, time served there helped socialize girls but not boys into adult gender roles. Moreover, while Caribbean women sometimes drove the second gang, and older women there and in the United States ran the trash gang, women rarely drove the great gangs. This preserved men's privileged access to supervisory and disciplinary labor. Equally important, slave societies embraced a profound division of labor between enslaved and white women: enslaved women were expected to show strength and stamina in the fields, while white women ideally did little or no outdoors work.

Beyond the fields, gender continued to shape work. Enslaved men occupied almost all occupations that either they or whites considered as skilled. Men were the mechanics, blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers, masons, carters, carriage drivers, sugar makers, boilermen, and furnacemen. The most highly skilled bondsmen enjoyed some prestige and received extra rations and authority over other slaves. Some also enjoyed much greater freedom of movement: an artisan might be hired out and make his own way from job to job. Women had a smaller range of skilled crafts, like cooking, midwifery, and nursing, and those few conferred less prestige and fewer material rewards on their practitioners than male crafts did upon men, and little or no added mobility. Whites did not consider domestic work—the most common female specialization—as skilled, although house servants sometimes gained privileged access to whites' used clothes and leftover food. ... women had little access to skilled occupations, and a higher proportion of women than men were field workers. On some estates, women made up the majority of the field-hands.

Historians have sometimes seemed uncertain whether these patterns stemmed from ideas about sexual difference or from sexual differences themselves. Jacqueline Jones has suggested that planters excluded women from skilled occupations for pragmatic reasons: “the high cost of specialized and extensive training” made it impractical to train women, since “childbearing and nursing” would interrupt their ability to provide “regular service” on the plantation or be hired out profitably. However, a substantial proportion of enslaved women never had children. If practical factors alone shaped access to skilled work, then some of these women would have been eligible. Their continued exclusion indicates that gender impeded a purely pragmatic response to reproductive biology.

Gender also shaped slaves' “after-hours” work. The tasks that men and women performed for themselves and their families differed. Typically, women cooked, cleaned, sewed, and washed for their families. In the West Indies where slaves had to grow their own provisions, women also performed much of the subsistence horticulture as well. Everywhere, women did most of the childcare. Only women had post-sundown orders to spin for their owners. In contrast, men fished, hunted, and made or repaired furniture. If they lived “abroad,” they usually commuted to visit wives and children. They also applied their greater opportunities to earn money or goods to their families' benefit. In the West Indies, many assisted in the

provision grounds. Yet no one has called men's work for their families a “second shift,” as feminist historians have characterized enslaved women's extra work.

Forcing enslaved women and men to work at the same tasks “de-gendered” neither sex. While slaves may have worked too hard to notice whether the neighboring bodies were male or female, we know that slaves' supervisors—white and black—not only noticed but also perceived some individuals as sexually attractive, available, and vulnerable. Women, not men, were overwhelmingly the targets of drivers' and overseers' sexual opportunism. Only an artificially narrow understanding would remove this aspect of gender relations from considerations of slaves' fieldwork. It is equally important to note that gender is constituted not solely through contrasts between men and women, but also through contrasts *among* men and *among* women. Thus, as long as some women, like slave owning women or enslaved housekeepers, did not perform fieldwork alongside men, enslaved women who did had a distinct gender in relationship to other women.

## Reproduction

...Staggering rates of infant mortality, low fertility, and low fecundity meant that Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean did not experience natural population growth until after slavery, yet those in Barbados, the southern mainland British colonies, and the United States did...Generally, planters in the major staple-producing areas, especially sugar planters, cared little and did less to improve fertility and reduce infant mortality. It was, quite simply, cheaper and easier to buy new slaves and work them quite literally to death than to rely on childbirth to increase and reproduce the labor force...

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, colonies across the Caribbean launched amelioration campaigns to fend off abolitionists' attacks and stabilize the slave labor supply. Giving pregnant and postpartum women a respite from work, improved rations, and other incentives might have improved outcomes for both mothers and children, but slave owners sometimes boasted more than their choices actually warranted. Even after the British closed the Atlantic slave trade, Caribbean planters generally had far more success in extracting field than reproductive labor from their bondswomen...In their wills, slave owners fantasized about future wealth, bequeathing not just living children and fetuses but also women's reproductive potential itself. Because both slave owners and enslaved women recognized the potential value of reproduction, contestation over reproduction was a constant. Taken together, the many local and regional studies of slave reproduction suggest that the exploitation of women's reproductive potential was always a subject of contestation in New World slavery, even in the many instances when planters did little to help enslaved women conceive, bear, and raise healthy children.

## Sexuality

Through interracial rape, white men asserted their dominance over African and African-American men, as well as over all women. While the fact of interracial sexual exploitation has long been acknowledged—having featured largely in abolitionist propaganda, for example—its impact on gender as well as race relations is a topic of relatively recent study.

Endemic throughout New World slavery and its aftermath, rape and sexual fantasies were particularly virulent in the Atlantic and internal slave trades. Edward Baptist observes that



enslaved women in the antebellum South were “desirable purchases because they could be raped,” and they were exquisitely “vulnerable to sexual assault...because they could be sold.” He argues further that by raping light-skinned women, antebellum whites could recapitulate centuries of white domination, suggesting that the fantasy and reality of abuse grew more potent, not less, over time. The overarching claim, however, about the centrality of sexual exploitation to slavery pertains throughout its New World history. Consequently, even sexual acts between slaves could take on the stink of coercion. As Thelma Jennings argued in 1990 ... when slave owners instructed two slaves to pair off, they coerced both men and women to perform sexual acts not of their own choosing. At the same time, some enslaved men were potential beneficiaries of breeding: some planters encouraged high-status men, such as drivers, to father children with whichever bondswomen they fancied. Freed people's own testimony suggests that some bondsmen took full advantage of the privilege. In its varied forms, sexual coercion did a lot of work for slaveholders: it produced new chattels; it marked all slaves' inferiority; it terrorized enslaved women and many enslaved men; and it humiliated and brainwashed many white women, all in ways that reinforced both gender and racial hierarchy.

Even long after the institution ended, fears related to sexuality and race continued to warp gender relations...Yet while the history of sexuality within slavery is a twisted and ugly story, it was also more than that, even for enslaved women who bore the worst of it. As Henrice Altink and others have argued, some enslaved women chose to enter sexual relationships with white men in the hope of “material favours,” or simply because they found reluctant acquiescence preferable to forcible rape. Overall, these women had but slim chance of gaining their own or their children's freedom...In the Old South, such relationships rarely resulted in tangible advantages for enslaved women and their children. In Jamaica, as Hilary Beckles has shown, the scarcity of English women made it common for enslaved women to act as housekeeper-mistresses to the resident planters, but a housekeeper rarely got to choose whether she would also be a concubine. Manumitting one's sexual partner and children was most common in the Spanish West Indies. In the French colonies, planters regularly ignored the Code Noir's requirement that they emancipate their own enslaved children. Across the slave societies, urban areas witnessed an especially wide range of interracial sex, ranging from long-term relationships between elite men and their bondswomen to casual encounters in brothels and taverns...

## Resistance

Resistance has been a particularly fruitful area of research in slavery studies, but its relationship to gender is ambiguous. Clearly, certain types of resistance were more common among bondsmen than bondswomen. Men made up a significantly higher percentage of runaways than did women, and men also figured far more prominently among rebels in both the USA and the Caribbean. Those actions, meanwhile, have often been celebrated, while more covert activities are sometimes deemed “accommodation” rather than genuine resistance. Compounding the problem of understanding gender and resistance is that many more covert forms, like feigning sickness and working slowly, were available to women and men. Where scholars have associated types of resistance with one sex, like poisoning with women, it remains unclear whether the pattern reflects the gendered division of labor, a gendered affinity, or other factors. Yet clear evidence of gendered resistance is emerging. Caribbean scholars like Bernard Moitt and David Geggus have demonstrated women's crucial support for rebellions; for example, women in revolutionary-era Saint-Domingue traded sex for ammunition. Other recent scholarship has sharpened our understanding of gender's role in

more covert aspects of direct resistance. Stephanie Camp argues that enslaved women in the antebellum South provided essential food and supplies to runaways, hid truants, and even helped negotiate the terms of their return to work. Their assistance depended in turn upon the gendered division of labor: women's typical confinement to the plantation's ambit meant that they were often available when a runaway needed assistance, while their part-chosen and part-imposed responsibility for cooking allowed them to decide whether and how often to redirect food to a hungry truant.

Perhaps the most obviously gendered resistance involved reproduction. Some enslaved women deliberately resisted childbearing for reasons ranging from the refusal to enrich their owners to the unwillingness to reproduce bondage. Slaves and slave owners alike suggested that women used a variety of methods to control their fertility: abstinence; herbal birth control; herbal and mechanical abortion; and, finally, infanticide. A combination of contraception and postnatal abstinence best explains birth spacing of up to and even over two years, which cannot be explained by lactation and postpartum amenorrhea alone. Ex-slaves—men and women—testified to deliberate contraception to deprive owners of additional capital and labour. Contraception was arguably gendered resistance for men as well as for women: while some enslaved men may have prided themselves on fathering many children—with many different mothers—others supported or even encouraged their wives' efforts to limit their families. Still, no one can estimate with any certainty the frequency or scale of enslaved men's and women's efforts to control their own reproductive lives. Similarly, it is impossible to determine how often women shammed obstetric and gynaecological complaints, given the variety of genuine diseases and injuries and the complicated mix of African and European attitudes about bodily health and medical care.

If historians hold up contraception as a form of resistance, they often have more trouble with infanticide. Slaveholders accused women of heedlessly smothering their infants, a kind of murder by neglect that confirmed whites' lowest opinions of enslaved women. Accordingly, some historians have hesitated to accept the diagnosis of infanticide, while others, like Sharon Ann Holt and Deborah Gray White, argue for benevolent motives and sympathetic interpretations: desperate but loving mothers murdered their children in order to spare them lives of bondage. Alternatively, some suggest that infanticide is not a helpful analytical category. Barbara Bush notes the belief, perhaps rooted in West African cultures, that babies only became fully human after their ninth day *ex utero*, which would imply that hastening death before that time involved something less prejudicial.

Moreover, biological motherhood was not magical, as Jennifer Morgan has recently argued, and presupposing mother-love minimizes the psychological impact of bondage, sexual abuse, and overwork that enslaved women in particular faced, especially those uprooted by the Atlantic or internal slave trades. It also trivializes the heroism that enslaved women—and men—displayed in daring to love, nurture, and protect their children. In this sense, attention to gynaecological resistance brings us back to a related observation about slave families. Forming families, whether by marriage, birth, or adoption, strengthened slaves and enabled some to continue and extend their resistance. However, the very virtues of family also meant they gave slave owners a powerful hold over their bondspeople, which some found far more effective than the use or threat of whippings.

## Black Femininity

Historians of enslaved women have long struggled to distinguish white stereotypes of nurturing Mammy, aggressive Sapphire, and lustful Jezebel from slaves' own gender identities. Arguments about whether women invested more significance in female networks or in conjugal relations, or whether women performed skilled work, also affect debates about women's identities. Compounding the difficulty of understanding enslaved women as mothers, lovers, and workers are long-standing questions about gender's priority for women of the African diaspora. In the twentieth century, many African-American women identified more with the civil rights struggle than the women's rights movement. This reflects both the historic racism of American feminism and the judgment that standing with black men against racism was the first and the greater call. If racial justice took priority, then perhaps racial identity did too. Some scholars have tried to theorize that as an essentially false question, because race and gender are mutually constitutive and inextricable. The bulk of the evidence from slavery makes clear not only that black women and men had more in common than black women and white women, but also that the gendered aspects of bondage must not be underestimated.

Some of the most productive recent scholarship in this area takes a multiply relational approach to gender, recognizing that gender meant something different for enslaved women when they talked with their husbands at night, or hoed with other slaves in the fields, or sewed clothes under their mistress's gaze. For an enslaved girl, puberty usually meant both fieldwork and the possibility of interracial rape, perhaps even before her first flirtation with a fellow slave. If sexual maturity increased a girl's fear for herself, it also likely enhanced her empathy for other women. It also afforded new opportunities for enjoyment: athletic dancing and fashionable clothes provided physical pleasure and, perhaps, the recognition that nights spent dancing could be understood as labour power reclaimed from their owners (sources are understandably stingy but nevertheless suggestive on this point). Maternity, meanwhile, brought new dreads—of seeing one's children separated by sale, lashed, demeaned, overworked, raped, or buried—but it also produced, at least for some, a redoubled protectiveness for vulnerable children that may have made them work even harder to resist their degrading bondage. At the same time, women at the peak of their working lives could take pride in their skill even as they resented its exploitation. Older women faced declining bodies that often rendered them less valuable in white eyes, but their knowledge, whether of medicinal plants, conjuring, planters' moods, or midwifery, could make them figures of great esteem to other slaves and sometimes even to whites. Life cycle, long a major area of analysis for free women, continues to attract scholarly attention, even if the key transitions for free people, like coming of age and marriage, operated very differently for slaves.

## OTHER CONTEXTS

### CRITICS ON ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN *MARY PRINCE*

[These short extracts have been curated from some of the major critical essays on issues related to the Mary's life story. Students are advised to read the essays for more details.]

**Paquet, S. P. "The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: The History of Mary Prince." *African American Review*, 26(1), 1992, 131.**

Mary Prince's slave narrative brings into sharp focus formative issues surrounding subjectivity and the engendering of national identity in preeminent texts of West Indian autobiography. A theory of the self is crafted here that projects the female autobiographical consciousness as historically aware, resistant, and sympathetically engaged with an oppressed slave majority in the region of her birth. It defines female subjectivity in national-historical terms. The public self-consciousness of the female slave there is not only about the empowering of women; it is also about the liberation of the whole society. Self-consciousness is engendered by consciousness of others. The tortured body of a female slave speaks through and on behalf of the tortured bodies of men and women and children alike. Old Daniel's sufferings on Turk's Island (64) are as important as old Sarah's (65), pregnant "Aunt" Hetty's(57),and the daily torture of the two little slave boys, the mulatto Cyrus and the African Jack (56). Interiority is expressed in connectedness to the collective human community.(132)

**Baumgartner, Barbara. "The Body as Evidence: Resistance , Collaboration and Appropriation in The History of Mary Prince." *Callaloo*, Volume 24, Number 1, Winter 2001, pp. 253-275**

In her book *The Body in Pain* , Elaine Scarry refers to the ways in which intense physical pain destroys the sufferers' sense of self and the world. Referring to this, Barbara Baumgartner points out:

Despite her graphic depiction of the physical brutality inflicted upon her under slavery, Prince rarely attempts to describe her bodily pain during these episodes or their undoubtedly painful aftermath. In the part of the text that relates the most physically destructive and arduous periods of her life, Prince characterizes herself as a passive, silent victim, recording the "unmaking" of her world.

#### MARY PRINCE AS A POSTCOLONIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIC WRITING

Whitlock, Gillian. *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*. Cassell, 2000. Mary Prince was the first British woman to escape from and publish a record of her experiences; she is, then, by any reckoning, "an unlikely autobiographer." (10)

The case of Mary Prince alerts us that autobiographic texts in the field of colonial and postcolonial cultures will raise issues of power and privilege, marginality and authority, truth and authenticity in ways which may disqualify them as autobiography as it is conventionally understood. Nevertheless, the radically compromised authors, narrators and figurations of the self which Prince and Strickland/Moodie introduce into their texts are characteristic of postcolonial autobiographic writing in particular... This autobiographical occasion... is one of those rare examples of what Felicity Nussbaum says 'literal contiguity' at the centre of Empire, an occasion where metropolitan English women and a woman from the colonies come into contact in a way that has multiple implications, where the intersection and interdependence of

identities and identifications between European and colonial women become apparent- what Suleri might call 'intimacies'. (15-16)

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AUTHORSHIP AND AUTHORITY

Editorial Intervention and the Role of the Amanuensis: Loss of Voice of the Female subaltern?

Rauwerda, A. M. "Naming, Agency, and 'A Tissue of Falsehoods' in "The History of Mary Prince", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2001), 397-411.

The 1831 slave narrative *The History of Mary Prince* is generally thought to be Mary Prince's autobiography. However, there is reason to believe that neither the narrating voice nor Prince's name are actually hers, and that the agency ascribed to her in this narrative may be more representative of the agendas of external creators of the text than of Prince herself. In *The History of Mary Prince*, Prince's name appears in various forms (Mary Prince, Mary Princess of Wales, Mary James, and Molly Wood) each of which reflects the objectives of different editors and owners. Editorial and mediatory figures such as Thomas Pringle, Susanna Moodie (nee Strickland), John Wood, Moira Ferguson, and Ziggi Alexander manifest their influence in intrusions into the narrative, appendices, editorial prefaces, and introductions, all of which serve to construct Prince in ideologically and politically loaded ways, and which, in many cases, actually change her name by so doing. These givers of names generally attempt to hide their manipulations, and inadvertently also hide Prince.(397)

**Lucy Bird, E. (2019). *Susanna Moodie's Last Letter about Mary Prince. Notes and Queries*, 66(2), 285–289.**

Early critics of the *History* either ignore Strickland's role or suggest that it is possible to read Prince's voice beyond the interfering presence of Strickland and the narrative's editor, the secretary of the London Anti-Slavery Society, Thomas Pringle. However, recent criticism favours the view of the *History* as a 'composite text' collaboratively produced by Prince, Strickland, and Pringle, suggesting that the *History* does not contain Prince's true and stable voice, and this is not separable from the text.(285)

**Allen, Jessica L. "Pringle's Pruning of Prince: The History of Mary Prince and the Question of Repetition" *Callaloo*, Volume 35, Number 2, Spring 2012, pp. 509-519.**

In his preface to *The History of Mary Prince*, Pringle describes the transcription and editing process in the following way:

The narrative was taken down from Mary's own lips by a lady who happened to be at the time residing in my family as a visitor. It was written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards pruned into its present shape;

retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible. (3)

Pringle's emphasis on Prince's agency and the insignificance of his own editorial acts seem to anticipate accusations like those of James McQueen, who wrote that Prince was merely a "tool" used by Pringle and the Anti-Slavery Society to damage the British Empire and its colonial endeavours (Quoted in Allen 2012)

**Allen, Jessica L. "Pringle's Pruning of Prince: The History of Mary Prince and the Question of Repetition" *Callaloo*, Volume 35, Number 2, Spring 2012, pp. 509-519.**

As Sara Salih notes, it is necessary to study the paratextual elements because the *History* is "a composite text" designed specifically to serve as anti-slavery propaganda (xiii). While the **paratext** does demonstrate Pringle's editorial presence and the propagandistic nature of the narrative, it can also offer us new ways of interpreting Prince's narrative. As Gerard Genette argues, the paratext is a "threshold" between the world's and the text's discourses (2). When viewed in this way, Pringle's preface reveals the ways in which racism and imperialism influenced the narrative and how the narrative, in turn, reflects these social realities.

Pringle's paratexts overwhelm Prince's story. Any reader looking at the physical book can observe his preface and supplementary materials engulfing her brief narrative. By the third edition of the *History*, Pringle's additions included the following: a title page, a preface, a postscript to the preface, footnotes to the narrative, a supplement, an appendix, and the "Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa, a Captured African." Apparently Pringle did not think Prince's narrative could stand on its own. As Salih observes, he attempts to validate her story through his supplementary material (xiv). Indeed, every paratextual addition, including the preface, aims to assure readers of Prince's character and verify the facts of her narrative." (510)

#### Role of Amanuensis

In one of her unpublished letters, reproduced with permission from Sheffield Archives<sup>1</sup>, addressed to James Montgomery dated 1 May 1831, Susanne Moodie writes<sup>2</sup>:

I take this opportunity of enclosing a small tract, which will not fail to interest you as an advocate for the abolition of the abhorred system of slavery. The narrative I took

---

<sup>1</sup> Susanna Moodie, letter to James Montgomery, 1 May 1831, Sheffield Archives, SLPS/36/891. Unpublished letter. reproduced with permission from Sheffield Archives.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Eleanor Lucy Bird's "Susanna Moodie's Last letter: About Mary Prince", *Notes and Queries*, Volume 66, Issue 2, June 2019, 85, 285–289.

down from the lips of a very sensible black woman in the service of my dear friend Mr. Pringle.

**Baumgartner, Barbara. "The Body as Evidence: Resistance , Collaboration and Appropriation in The History of Mary Prince." *Callaloo*, Volume 24, Number 1, Winter 2001, - 2001 -**

Scholars of slave narratives have dismissed dictated texts because of questions of truth and veracity. As a number of these critics have argued, the white editor/amanuensis had an enormous amount of control over the future of the black narrator and his/her manuscript. William Andrews represents the typical position of literary scholars toward as-told-to tales: even while acknowledging that problems of composition, editing, origin, and control of manuscript complicate all early African-American autobiographies, Andrews finds dictated narratives so troubling that he excludes them from any in-depth scrutiny in his full length study on black autobiography. These criticisms raise valid concerns. There are known cases of inauthentic slave narratives passed off for the "real thing." There is little evidence, however, to support such a charge in the case of Mary Prince's narrative. While Miss S— wrote children's books, short stories, and poetry, which were all produced and published under her name Susanna Strickland before she worked with Prince, the contrasting styles of Prince's narrative and Strickland's fiction, which critic Carol Shields described as "florid romantic" (2), suggest that Strickland did not embellish the slave's story. Further, some of Prince's notable metaphors, such as her figurative use of the Caribbean spice, cayenne, as the wounding agent in place of the offensive words of slave traders, clearly emerge from Prince's experience. Prince's narrative is markedly devoid of the types of "stylistic extravagances" that white amanuenses and/or editors inserted in dictated narratives that were claimed nonetheless to be faithful transcriptions of the former slave's words (Olney 163).

#### AUTOGRAPHY, TESTIMONY , TRAUMA, MEMORY

The decade of 1990's saw a renewed interest in Trauma Studies because of the late twentieth century's traumatic effects of Jewish holocaust on the survivors. Though the trauma of the Holocaust is different from that of slavery, both present "problems of traumatization, severe oppression, a divided heritage, the question of a founding trauma, the forging of identities in the present and so forth." (Ward 4)

Initially, trauma was taken to be a bodily wound. Sigmund Freud played an important role in changing the understanding of trauma to describe a psychological wound. Cary Caruth, an influential critic of Trauma Studies defines trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden and catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed,

uncontrollable repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”  
(Caruth181)

Prince's *History* is the earliest published representation of a collective experience of female trauma. This autobiographical account fits into the Latin American genre of 'testimonio' which emerged a new literary form in the 1960s. Prince's *History* "is used as a testimony in the literal and legal sense not just to her own experience, but to a much wider system of cruelty and oppression."(Ward 35)

**Memory** plays the most creative role in autobiography, "memory that gives life to the incidents selected...memory is an unconscious agent of selection."(Finney 44) The autobiographical truth is not based on any evidences- or documents but on memory for, "memory is normally the principal source of raw material for the autobiographer."(Finney 44) Roy Pascal argues : "Memory can be trusted because autobiography is not just reconstruction of the past, but interpretation; the significant thing is what the man can remember of his past."(19)

BEFORE I CONCLUDE,

**Read** the 'Abstract' of a critical essay "Bringing the 'Black Atlantic' into Global History: The Project of Pan-Africanism" by Andreas Eckert given below. Paul Gilroy wrote *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness(1993)* wherein he writes about the African diaspora which is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once, a black Atlantic culture whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something new and, until now, unremarked. Apply the ideas present there to analyse the identity of enslaved Mary Price and her likes based on your reading of *The History of Mary Prince*:



ABSTRACT  
Andreas Eckert

Paul Gilroy's ground breaking study on the "Black Atlantic" has revitalized scholarly interest in the connections between Africans, African-Americans and generally people of African descent on both sides of the Atlantic. Gilroy argued that the Black Atlantic—the cultural web between diaspora Africans spread around Atlantic shores—has been crucial for modern sensibilities in the twentieth century. In this context he makes the further point that "historians should take the Atlantic as a unit of analysis in their discussion of the modern world to produce an explicitly transnational perspective..." adding, "The history of the black Atlantic, continually criss-crossed by the movement of Black People—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles toward emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship, is a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory." Gilroy stresses the importance of the role of free travellers and of cultural exchanges among freed or free black populations in creating a shared Black Atlantic culture and shared black identities that transcend territorial boundaries. He describes the African diaspora primarily in terms of what he calls "discontinuous" cultural exchange among diverse African diaspora populations. Drawing examples mainly from the English speaking black populations of England, the United States, and the Caribbean, he argues that the shared cultural features of African diaspora groups "generally result far less from shared cultural memories of Africa than from these groups' mutually influential but culturally neutral responses to their exclusion from the benefits of the Enlightenment legacy of national citizenship and political equality in the West."

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Allen, Jessica L. "Pringle's Pruning of Prince: *The History of Mary Prince* and the Question of Repetition," *Callaloo* 35 (Spring 2012) 2: 509–519.

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/482401/pdf>

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Antze, Paul and Michael Lambek (eds.) *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, Routledge, 2016.

Banner, Rachel. "Surface and Stasis: Re-reading Slave Narrative via *The History of Mary Prince*," *Callaloo* 36 (Spring 2013) 2: 298-311.

Baumgartner, Barbara. "The Body as Evidence: Resistance, Collaboration, and Appropriation in *The History of Mary Prince*," *Callaloo* 24 (Winter 2001) 1: 253-275.

Bird, Eleanor Lucy. "Susanna Moodie's Last Letter about Mary Prince." *Notes and Queries*, Volume 66, Issue 2, June 2019, Pages 285–289.

Carey, B., M. Ellis and S. Salih (eds) *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and its Colonies, 1760-1838*.

Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History. *Yale French Studies*, No. 79, Literature and the Ethical Question (1991), pp. 181-192

de Man, Paul. Autobiography as Defacement. *MLN*, Vol. 94, No. 5, Comparative Literature.

Ferguson, Moira. *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834*, Routledge, 1992.

Gadpaille, Michelle. "Trans-colonial Collaboration and Slave Narrative: *Mary Prince* Revisited," *English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries* [Slovenia] 8 (Autumn 2001) 64-77.

Bernews, "Enduring Legacy of Bermuda's Mary Prince," November 20, 2011.

Larrabee, M. J. "'I Know what a Slave Knows': Mary Prince's Epistemology of Resistance," *Women's Studies* 35(2006)453-73.

Lejeune, Phillipe. *Le Pacte Autobiographique*. Seeuil, 1975.

Loriggio, Francesco. Comparative Literature and the Genres of Interdisciplinarity. *World Literature Today*. Vol. 69, No. 2, Comparative Literature: States of the Art (Spring, 1995), 256-262.

Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. "The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: *The History of Mary Prince*," *Black American Literature Forum* 26 (1992)131–46.

Pascal, Roy. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.

Rintoul, Suzanne. "'My Poor Mistress': Marital Cruelty in *The History of Mary Prince*," *English Studies in Canada* 37 (September/December 2001) 3-4: 41-60.

Satchidanandan, K. *Authors, Texts, Issues : Essays on Indian Literature*. Perfect International, 2003.

Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Thomas, Sue, "New Information on Mary Prince in London," *Notes & Queries* 58 (March 2011) 1: 82-85.

Todorova, Kremena. "'I Will Say the Truth to the English People': *The History of Mary Prince* and the Meaning of English History," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43 (Fall 2001) 3: 285-302.

Ward, Abigail(ed). *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Whitlock, Gillian. "Autobiography and Slavery: Believing *The History of Mary Prince*," in *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*, 8-29 (London & New York: Cassell, 2000).

Zezeza, Paul Tiyambe. "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic", *African Affairs*, Vol. 104, No. 414 (Jan., 2005), 35-68.

\*\*\*\*