

# Literature Combats Human Trafficking: Tracing Out the Therapeutic Feature of Literature with Special Reference to Christopher Stoller's *The Black Lens*

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**Abstract**– Christopher Stoller in his novel *The Black Lens* discuss in detail the power of Literature to combat Human Trafficking and exposes the therapeutic feature of Literature through the characters of the novel.

**Keywords**– Literature, Therapy, Human Trafficking, Modern slavery, Sex trafficking.

Slavery is a weed that grows on every soil.

- Edmund Burke [1]

The origin of the word 'slave' can be the shortening of Old French 'esclave', equivalent of Medieval Latin 'sclava'. It was a reflection of the servitude of Slavonic peoples by subjugation in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Roger Sawyer, member of the Council of Anti – Slavery International and the Recipient of the AireyNeave Award for Research into Freedom Under National Laws, traces out the genesis of slavery to the life of Eve who was told by God that Adam would enslave her and was seen as a "law of nature" by the cultures older than Judaism [2].

Slavery has taken different forms to suit various civilizations and cultures: serfdom, chattel slavery, forced labour, slavery by descent, debt – bondage, domestic and agricultural servitude, child labour, child soldiering and exploitation of women through the institution of marriage. In the article, *Slavery in Africa*, it is explained that the relationship between the slaver and the enslaved, contained tensions that helped to define slavery in each situation [3]. Slavery is considered to be a form of exploitation and is omnipresent in the histories of civilizations. With the idea that slaves are just properties to be owned by a minor, dominating group of people, slavery has flourished. Through coercion, complete subordination of the commoditized individual is demanded. This slave status is under the complete control of the slaves. The economic, social and political rights are also denied to the enslaved. The slaves were assigned with various tasks based on the demand of the contemporary culture and economy: agriculture, mining, debt – bondage, sexual servitude, etc. If they resist or fail to obey, they were severely punished as Niall McKeown, author and lecturer in Ancient History says, "Ancient writers clearly believed, however that helots were harshly treated, humiliated and sometimes murdered" [3].

The sociopolitical metamorphoses of many great civilizations in turn changed the temperament of slavery itself. The enslaved community was referred with different names to suit the nature of their enslavement – helot, communal slaves, mining or agricultural slaves, serfs, chattel slaves, etc. Sawyer, in his book entitled *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, refers to the Roman Law that was followed in the Christian Church, throughout the period of medieval serfdom: a distinguish between Chattel slavery and ameliorated slavery. Chattel slavery was "unjust" and Ameliorated slavery was "morally legitimate" [2]. These explanations helped to continue with slavery under a descent cover. Further McKeown also says, "... it remained a pattern into the classical period (500 – 300 B.C)" [2]. In spite of the changes in the norms and names of slavery, it has remained an unquestioned system of social life till the initiation of the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century.

International Laws were designed to weaken the bond between law and slavery, as a result of the long tradition of the abolitionist movement. Such changes in the policy and the evolving social norms helped former slaves to renovate their exploited lives but were incapable to eradicate the updated manifestations of slavery. This modern form of slavery include forced labour, debt bondage, human trafficking, descent – based slavery, child slavery, forced and early marriage. Anti – Slavery International, an organization founded in 1839, the oldest international human rights organization in the world, explains modern slavery as,

Slavery did not end with abolition in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, it changed its forms and continues to harm people in every country in the world. Today slavery is less about literally owning other people – although that still exists – but more about being exploited and completely controlled by someone else, without being able to leave. [4]

Exploitation and slavery are inseparable: one leads to the other. These two occur at various levels, stage by stage, it is difficult to locate the beginning, the end and also the overlapping of slavery and exploitation. The meaning for the word *slavery* is with some changes now: exploitation and ultimate control over someone else and rejection of freedom. Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery which prevails in all countries. “Increased demand and supply” makes human trafficking the fastest developing form of transnational crime [5]. Globalization, migration, high profits, poverty and “marginalisation of many rural communities” [5] are also some of the strong reasons. Unlike drugs, human beings can be “sold repeatedly” and this makes the “trade more attractive for all involved” [5]. Anti – Slavery International Organization says that 40.3 million people are in modern slavery and 51% of identified victims of trafficking are women. The most common form of human trafficking is sex trafficking, “an extremely traumatic form of human trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion” [6]. Along with the young women those are trafficked for sexual servitude, the society also suffers because of such victimization and it is “a direct blow to the rights of women and to gender equality” [5]. These forms of modern slavery have become a global problem at present.

Literature being a concrete record of the contemporary society, does not stop with diagnosing a social problem but suggests a strong solution to the readers. As the representatives of the milieu, writers through their creative writings make a sincere attempt to heal that social blight. They suggest a therapy to all the deranged minds irrespective of gender, creed, race and caste: supportive and collaborative treatment for a mental or physical illness followed by a diagnosis.

Christopher Stoller’s debut *The Black Lens* (2016) is the result of a research conducted for more than three years on sex trafficking. Being an advocate for the victims of human trafficking, he travels an extra mile to show the strength of Literature and explains how Zoey, the protagonist, confronted the traffickers and eliminated the victimhood by identifying herself with the characters of Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The novel, *The Black Lens* is presented in three parts: The Focus, The Shutter and the Flash. This structure of the novel may represent the duality of a camera: the lens that materializes a woman’s body in sex trafficking, also has the capacity to redeem the victim’s life by sensitizing the world to this serious issue.

In the third chapter of ‘The Focus’ after a short discussion, Mr. Brookstone, Zoey’s teacher at school, introduces the concept of slavery to the class. He deals with David Copperfield’s lifestyle and continues to explain ‘slavery’ in the contemporary society. Charles Dickens addressed a manifold issues of the Victorian society but the consequences of exploitation was the main creative impulse. Mr. Brookstone says, “We’ve made some progress. But some things haven’t changed much. People today are still forced into slavery. It may look a little different but it’s still the same crime.” [7] A distressful ambience prevails in the class, when Brookstone utters these words. He continues to read from Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, “I hope that simple love and truth will be strong in the end. I hope that real love and truth are stronger in the end than any evil or misfortune in the world.” [7]

The traffickers victimize women and children through continuous threats, confinement, physical abuse or terrorize to kill them or their dear ones. In *Human Trafficking*, it is explained as, “This forced labour in the drug industry was combined with beatings, stabbings and sexual assault as well as coercion to witness acts of violence committed upon other children and women.” [5]

Instead of kidnapping their prey – Zoey and Camille, the local ring continuously threaten them by sending the pictures of bruised victims. This constant threat to abuse and murder, gradually makes Zoey and her younger sister, Camille to surrender themselves to the traffickers.

Mr. Brookstone discusses the life of David Copperfield with Zoey and her classmates. He questions his class, “Why wouldn’t David just leave right away? Why’d he stay there?” [7]. Zoey replies that David Copperfield was afraid of her stepdad and his beatings. This absence of parental care is also a major issue in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. Oliver becomes vulnerable to Artful Dodger and Fagin because of the absence of his parents in his life. Louis Shelley says, “... familial exploitation often becomes a stepping stone to be abused by the traffickers.” [7] Zoey’s father Ricky who was supposed to bestow parental care turned out to be the primary exploiter. She finds a way to escape whenever Ricky tries to rape her.

Several issues discussed in *The Black Lens* finds its base in the classic works on slavery – Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. The characters of these fiction and the language of the corresponding authors ignite courage and provides shelter for Zoey’s distressed mind. Stoller says, through the novel, Zoey wanted to “forget her own bleak life and live in the world of another. It helped her forget her own problems – at least until the last page” [7] of the novel.

Salley Vickers, a British novelist, in the article, *Move Over Freud: Literary Fiction is the Best Therapy*, says, “Immersion in a fictional society seems to promote many of the rewards of immersion in actual society: among other benefits, it encourages escape from the self, by no means always escapist” [8]. As Salley Vickers says, Zoey tries to heal all the problems that arose because of the sex traffickers in her life through reading novels. When she was physically abused she escapes from that physique/body and gains her ‘self’ by recollecting the words of Oliver Twist and David Copperfield. She thought that she was the only target of the local exploiters but the life of David Copperfield made her realize that she is not alone and ‘slavery’ is not new to this world and this imaginary society of David Copperfield and Oliver Twist immerses her in the actual one.

The renowned international policies against human trafficking, the public or the prosecutor and even her parents failed to save her from victimization. The power of language in the books that she enjoyed, empowers her, makes her to voice out for her exploited life. The understanding and the identification of the literary characters within herself ignites the flame of freedom and makes the protagonist kill her exploiters at the end of the novel and escape victimization. Down the ages, Literature combats slavery, a social malady, through its language. It constantly suggests a therapy to every civilized society that depends entirely on the relationship between the writer and the reader.

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