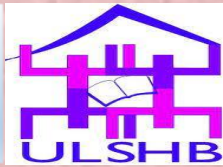




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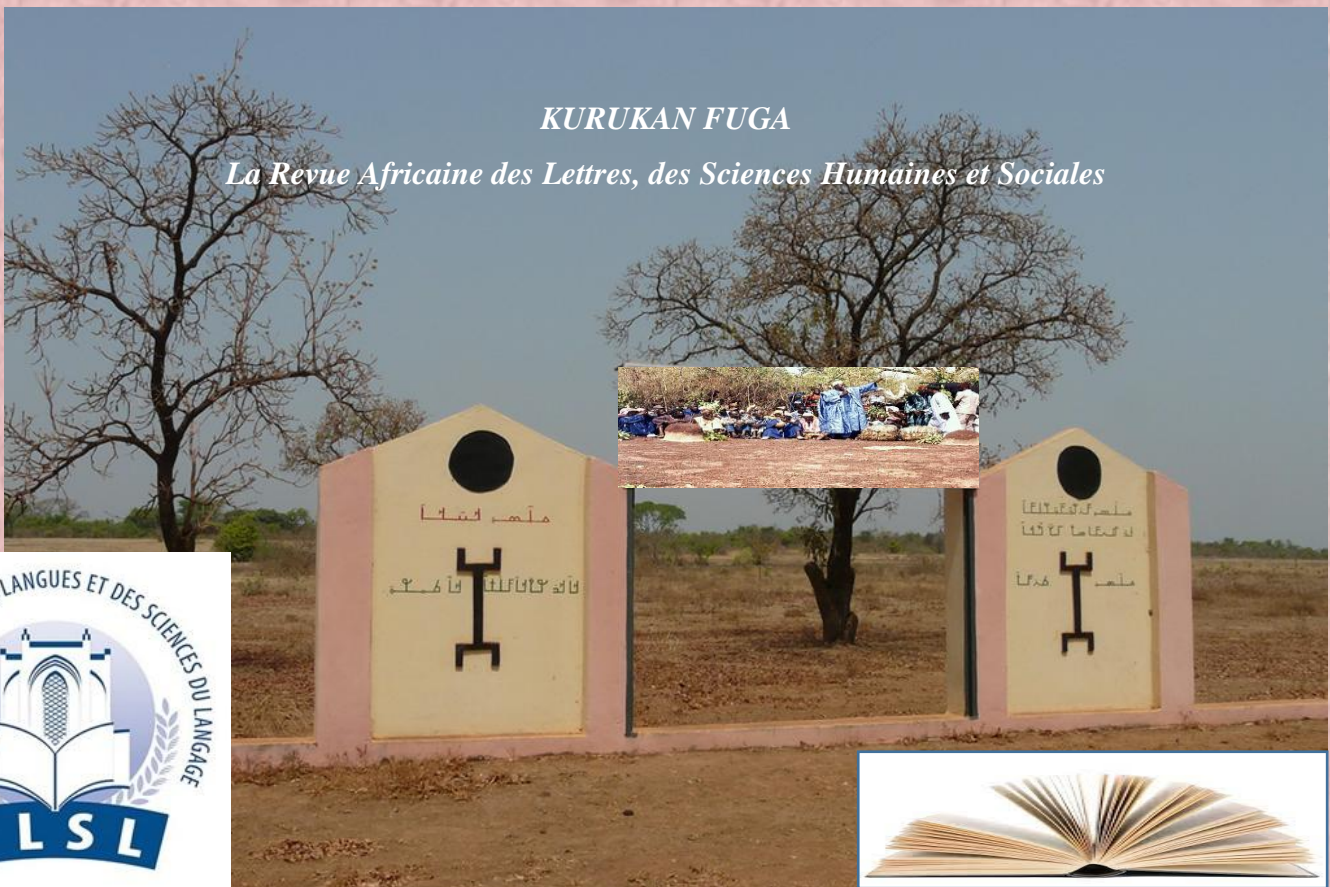
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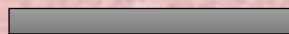


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**DISMEMBERMENT OF SLAVE FAMILIES IN THE PERIOD OF SLAVERY:  
CAUSES AND ULTERIOR OBJECTIVES IN THE NARRATIVES OF OLAUDAH  
EQUIANO AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS**

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**Résumé**

Cet article a pour objectif de décrypter les principales raisons qui sous-tendent la volonté de l'homme blanc de disloquer les familles d'esclaves noirs à l'époque de l'esclavage. On a observé que tout au long de cette période, le démembrement des familles d'esclaves par les maîtres blancs était banal. En effet, cette pratique inhumaine visait à démoraliser les Noirs réduits en esclavage afin de les rendre soumis tuant toute ambition de résistance qu'ils pourraient avoir et garantir une productivité flegmatique pour les propriétaires blancs. Méthodologiquement, la méthode qualitative fut utilisée pour collecter les données de l'étude. La théorie postcoloniale a également été utilisée dans les analyses et les interprétations des données. En ce qui concerne les résultats, l'étude a démontré principalement que les maîtres blancs utilisaient en réalité la dislocation familiale pour montrer aux esclaves noirs qu'ils étaient des biens meubles, donc incapables de ressentir l'affection familiale. Deuxièmement, les résultats prouvèrent que les familles d'esclaves ont été démembrées uniquement pour les démoraliser et neutraliser toute volonté de résistance susceptible de mettre en péril la productivité des fermes de leurs maîtres.

**Mots clés : Afrique, Amérique, Famille noire, dislocation, résistance, esclavage.**

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**Abstract**

This article aims at deciphering the main reasons underlying the white man's endeavor to disrupt black slave families in the slavery era. It has been observed that throughout that period, the dismemberment of slave families by masters was commonplace. Indeed, that inhumane practice was meant to demoralize the enslaved Blacks in order to make them submissive, killing any ambition of resistance they might have and guarantee a peaceful productivity for white owners' business. That is, when a slave was stripped off his family, he would become hopeless and demoralized. Thus, the latter was easily manageable and productive to the delight of the white owners. Besides, for fear of experiencing family separation, some black slaves had become passive. Methodologically, the qualitative method was used to collect the study's data. The postcolonial theory was also used in the analyses and the interpretations of the data. As for the results, the study has primarily demonstrated

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that white masters had actually used family disruption as a way of showing the black slaves that they were chattels, thus incapable of feeling any family affection. Secondly, the results have also proved that slave families were dismembered just to demoralize them and neutralize any desire of resistance that could jeopardize the productivity of the farms of their masters.

**Key words:** Africa, America, black family, disruption, resistance, slavery.

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## **Introduction**

Autobiographical slave narratives are historical books which stand as testimonies for the better understanding of the real experiences of the immediate actors of the horrendous institution of slavery. In that, the autobiographies, written by two well-known African American writers namely Olaudah Equiano in 1789 and Frederick Douglass in 1845, are the types of the narratives that give an insight into the practice of slavery and its implications both on the enslavers and the enslaved Blacks, mainly from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In fact, the period of slavery was marked by the phenomenon of family dislocation of the black slaves. However, the recurrence of slaves' family disruption was undoubtedly motivated by a number of factors which seem slightly accounted for by researchers.

Thus, the objective of this research study is to investigate into the main reasons underlying the white man's inclination to disrupt the enslaved Blacks from their families throughout that tragic period for people of African descent. The analyses of the data are done on the basis of the postcolonial theory within the framework of the qualitative research method. This article is divided into two main parts. First, it scrutinizes the underlying causes behind the slave masters' inclination for slaves' family disruption. In the end, the study accounts for the implications stemming from Slaves' Family Dislocation.

### **1. Underlying Causes of Slaves' Family Disruption**

All along the period of slavery from the 15<sup>th</sup> up to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the disruption of slave families was commonplace both on African mainland and the western countries, particularly the USA. In this section, the study strives to demonstrate the two main causes underlying the white man willingness to separate black slaves from their families.

#### **1-1. Racial and Cultural Reasons**

Since the very beginning of the European institution of slavery, one of the major features which was commonplace is the family disintegration of slaves. By considering the first causes presented by white enslavers in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to justify Africans' enslavement, it can be construed that the selection of Africans for bondage was racially and culturally motivated. The world is vast and there are many nations whereby different ethnic, cultural and racial groups lived; however, if not the race factor, what could have motivated the Arabs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the Europeans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to reduce Africans to slaves? It is in this context that, according to Coulibaly Z, Coulibaly A S, Alassane S (2022), the arguments underlying both the Arabs and the Europeans' enslavement of Africans was motivated by the latter's skin color. The following lines evidence the foregoing idea:

Since the very beginning of the Africans' enslavement whether by the Arabs or Westerners, the race argument, mainly their blackness, had been one of the catalytic reasons underlying Africans' predicaments. It entails that Africans' blackness was the key factor on the basis of which several Eurocentric stereotypes on Africa and Africans had been deliberately devised to ensure the apologia for slavery. Historically, the Eurocentric conception of blackness goes back to the 15th century with the falsification of the stories of Caïn and Cham to justify the enslavement of black people (p.108).

In the extract, it is explicitly revealed that Westerners and Arab people alike had used stereotypical allegations, based on falsified stories to sustain the inferiority of the black race on the one hand, and their enslavement on the other hand. Considering the foregoing evidence put forwards by Whites to impose their hegemony on Africans through slavery, the separation of the latter's families in the course was also racially and culturally enthused.

In the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, the mentioned evidence is highlighted. This autobiography presents a lot of instances which testify the white enslavers' inconsideration toward Blacks' humanity. Indeed, in order to show the superiority of their race and the inferiority of that of the Blacks, also tagged as subhuman, white slave merchants engaged in the destruction of black families. In that, Equiano reveals that the enslavers used to chase after little children when their parents were absent. In the case of the protagonist, he upholds that he was abducted with his sister, but in the course of their deportation to the West, the enslavers had separated them again: "But even this small comfort was soon to have an end, for scarcely had the fatal morning appeared when she was again torn from me forever! I was now more miserable, if possible than before. The small relief which her presence gave me from pain was gone..." (Equiano 18). The excerpt highlights the sorrow of the writer when his enslavers had parted him from his sister. The reason behind that separation was clearly racial and cultural. First, the white enslavers of that epoch did not regard black slaves, by extension the black people in general, as full human beings as they were stereotyped as savages. Accordingly, the separation of slaves from their families was just normal. The latter were regarded as pure chattels, so they were given the same treatment as animals. When the owner of an animal wants to sell it, he does not care about its family relationship.

Furthermore, the family disruption was seen by white enslavers in that angle. In this respect, Coulibaly and Koné (2023) in their article uphold as follows: "separating a human being from his relatives is like distorting his human nature or all that makes him a human being, for that person would never be the same person again all along his life" (p.86). These researchers have supported that one of the reasons why white enslavers and masters exerted family dislocation was to destroy the human nature of the subjugated Blacks. It means that this technique was carried out in order to change the personality of the enslaved Blacks, making them believe in their sad fate which is the inferiority of their race. Surprisingly, slave merchants and masters used slaves' family disruption just to satisfy their superiority egos.

In the similar perspective, Douglass recounts in his narrative that he was also separated from his mother when he was an infant; what is more, he relates that he did not know his mother's identity until he grew up. He upholds: "My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant – before I knew her as my mother It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age"(Douglass,1845,p.2). In this passage, the narrator argues that it was recurrent to separate slave women from their children after birth, and he himself was the living example of such a situation. The identity of his mother was hidden to him due to that separation.

As demonstrated previously, the main goal of that separation was to kill their nature because family is important in the life of a human being. Hence, to make slaves feel themselves as pure chattels, masters opted for the destruction of slave families. In a word, the primary motivation of slaves' dislocation was racial; therefore, they not only objected the enslaved Blacks to show their supremacy over them, but also to make the latter doubt their own humanity.

### **1-2. Strategic Reasons**

After discussing the racial motivation of the dislocation slaves' family during the period of the transatlantic slavery, another more eloquent reason was strategic. Indeed, the strategic reasons were intended to achieve two main objectives. First of all, as the institution of slavery was mainly based on economy and productivity, the white enslavers had to ensure of a sound and peaceful operation of the slave business. So they believed that destroying slave families can guarantee the achievement of the indicated objective.

The agents involved in the enslavement of Africans found it necessary to part slaves from their families in order to kill the spirit of resistance in the enslaved Blacks. Although slave masters pretended and insisted explicitly that black people were inferior creatures, they actually knew that if they destroyed slave families, they would be able to control them. The destruction of slaves' family would mean demoralizing them and making them submissive. Family is very important in the life of an individual, so when it is taken away from you, you would be in disarray. Besides, the one who is deprived of his/her family will not have any landmark. In other words, the family is the landmark which permits an individual to set goals in his life and try to achieve them. It is in the light of the foregoing fact that Equiano reveals that when he and the other enslaved Africans were stolen from their families, they were so disoriented that many captives expressed pitiful and sad lamentations to show the loss of their morale. The next lines substantiate the previous idea: "Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery" (Equiano,1996,p.28). In the passage, one can decipher that the lamenting slaves had lost all hope of reuniting with their families again. As a result, they would lose morale and all motivation; accordingly, they would be posed, submissive and manageable slaves. As an illustration, Coulibaly and Koné (2023) argue: "The frequency of slaves' family dismantlement during slavery period demonstrates that it was premeditated by white enslavers. As indicated previously, the white enslavers knew that by destroying slave families, they would destroy the morale of the captives, and thus making them passive" (p.86). Killing the morale and the spirit of slaves through the destruction of their families was a guarantee of slaves'

submission and their self-abandonment. In relation to that, Sinha writes: “Rooted in “a deeply held belief in white racial superiority,” slavery was not merely about labor but constituted a comprehensive system of social control. The consistent threat and frequently executed practice of family separation was a central part of this system of control” (p.7). This umpteenth passage testifies that family separation was an over whole strategy intended to impose the hegemony of the white race on the black one and force the latter to accept their domination. This is actually the reason why that situation of family dislocation was commonplace during the period of slavery in Africa as well as in America.

In regard of the above paragraph, Frederick Douglass insists that the expected objective behind the white masters’ inclination to separate slaves from their genitors was to destroy the family affection. In that, such a motherless child is expected to be less demanding and more obeying the whatsoever order from masters. As a matter of fact, many enslaved Blacks who underwent the mentioned family dislocation, became submissive and manageable, and then the preprogrammed objective of the slave masters would be achieved. Hence, the submission of slaves as a result of family dislocation would guarantee and pave the way for the accomplishment the materialistic end of the white enslavers. It means that those Whites involved in slave business destroyed slaves’ families to make them docile, and submissive which eventually rendered the slave business more profitable to masters. Family separation not only destroyed the resistance spirits of black slaves, but also rendered them more productive for the great delight of the white masters. In the light of that, Coulibaly and Koné (2023) assert as follows: “the hunger for wealth led white slave holders to destroy many black families and disseminate its members” (p89). This passage corroborates one more time the materialistic motivation of the white enslavers in their inclination to destroy families of the subjugated Blacks.

## **2. Ramifications Emanating from Slaves’ Family Dislocation**

This section seeks to account for the eventual drawbacks that resulted in the dislocation of the slaves’ families by the white enslavers.

### **2-1. Destruction of Family Bonds**

The dismantlement of the family had a tremendous effect on the relationship of the enslaved Blacks and their related people. Living far away from one’s family members can distort a person’s family affection. Taking the example of Equiano, he relates that when he was separated from his beloved ones, he went through a tremendous depression. However, as time went by, Equiano’s melancholy dissipated and started to idolize the Whites. In this regard, he relates as follows: “I became inured to that service and began to consider myself happily situated ... I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen but relished their society and manners” (p.38). The extract denotes that the young protagonist had started to bear some affection towards the white people, and the sadness and melancholy he suffered when he was initially kidnapped from his family in Africa, had decreased with time. Time has always the last word. It can transform the heart of a docile and affectionate being. Therefore, the likes

of Equiano found themselves trapped in the alienation, causing them to transfer<sup>1</sup>. As a result, the family ties existing between the writer and his family was severely damaged.

Similarly, Douglass has also insisted on the devastating effect of family separation on the family bond of the Blacks. In relation to that, he relates: “for what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection towards its mother... and to destroy the natural affection” (Douglass, 1996, p.2). Inferring from the above, Douglass believes that the main reason behind such a cruel situation was the destruction of Blacks’ family bonds, especially the mother and child affection. It is in this context that the writer expounds that he did not know his mother until he grew older. In fact, as mentioned earlier in the first section of the current study, the narrator had been separated from his mother when he was an infant, so he did not know the identity of his genitor until his teenage. In this situation, Douglass could not develop a solid mother and child affection. Such a person would be lost and disoriented. As demonstrated before, the family is the landmark which allows a human being to situate himself. However, without that landmark, the individual is lost and cannot reason like the other human beings who have benefited from family affection. In regard to what precedes, Tristan L. Tolman, AG (2011) argues: “This continual separation denied slaves the ability to function as families. It prevented them from sharing the responsibilities of households and children and providing each other with intimacy and love” (p.8). The passage illustrates how much family separation impacted negatively the enslaved Blacks, preventing them from establishing solid families on the one hand, and on the other hand, denying them the opportunity of feeling family affection and love. It means that the separation had denatured the normal family status of the enslaved Blacks. The partial or the permanent separation had distorted the hearts of the latter as they could no longer feel the natural family affection for their beloved people. LaShawnDa Pittman (2012) expresses the following view on the slaves’ family separation: “Slavery stripped African American children of any possibility of a childhood. ... They labored from an early age, experienced weakened bonds with their mothers, disrupted relationships with their fathers, were at-risk for malnutrition, injury, and inadequate psychological development”(pp.10-11). This umpteenth assertion corroborates the destruction of children and parents bonds as a result of the disruption of their families and the harsh treatment that followed that process.

## **2-2. The Psychological Trauma**

Family dislocation had not only brought about the destruction of slave family bonds but also caused tremendous psychological trauma on the mindsets of the enslaved Blacks and their offspring. *The Interesting Narrative* of Equiano is a reference in terms of the mental disturbances of the institution of slavery for Blacks. Thus, Equiano reports that he had personally been in that situation of mental disillusionment because of the effect of slavery when he was brought from Africa to England. He goes on explaining that he had started to bear a kind of close affection for his white master and his new living condition in England as he was hosted by white family before his transportation to America. Since he was a young boy who newly arrived from Africa, he was bound to be transported to the Americas like his peers. By the time,

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<sup>1</sup> Transference, from Freud’s perspective, is when a patient is captivated by his therapist. He transfers the affections he had for his parents to his analyst. Thus, the patient under the influence of the therapist would do anything to please the latter in the hope of getting his applause.

the little Equiano was placed under the care of a white family before his shipment to America. So the white woman, under whom Equiano was placed, had the habit to wash him with other white children. It was at that moment that Equiano had noticed some dissimilarities between his skin tone and the skin tone of the other white children. After that observation, he became neurotic and thus believed that his skin color was not normal. This mental alienation of the protagonist is exemplified in like manner:

I had often observed that when her mother washed her face it looked very rosy, but when she washed mine it did not look so: I therefore tried to often times myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same color as my little playmate (Mary), but it was all in vain, and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions (Equiano, 1996, p.36).

From the excerpt, Equiano shows that on his arrival on the European soil, he was so much alienated that he attempted to dispose of his skin color. Furthermore, it was at that particular moment that he experienced transference as he tried to resemble the other white children by attempting to bleach his skin by rubbing it. This situation of the protagonist could also illustrate the fact that slavery had dazzled the enslaved Africans to a point that some of them tended to dispose of their natural African attributes for the European ones. In other words, the writer's example of alienation ascertains that, during bondage, some slaves tried to mimic their enslavers by downplaying their own human status. In short, Equiano's abduction from Africa and his unwilling presence in Europe and America gained him a mental alienation.

Parallel to the *Interesting Narrative by Equiano*, the autobiography by Frederick Douglass also testifies the traumatic repercussions of bondage on the mindsets of black slaves. For instance, Douglass bears witness that slavery had also alienated the enslaved Blacks rendering them self-centered and nonchalant about their own situation and that of their fellow slaves. In that, Frederick Douglass presents some instances of behavioral transformation of the enslaved Blacks through their daily life experience on plantations. He explains that under slavery, some slaves became so selfish and individualistic that they only thought of their own wellbeing rather than that of the majority of their fellow slaves. In relation to that he writes: "they think their own better than that of others" (Douglass, 1845, p. 16). From this quote, Douglass informs the reader that western capitalistic societies were founded on materialism and individualism where money and profit epitomized power and keys to everything. In that kind of society, everyone is interested in their own personal success instead of the general one. In the light of the foregoing situation, slaves, being the subjects of their individualistic masters were also indoctrinated to absorb that ideology of individualism.

In the similar dynamic way, Douglass insists that there was an incredible rivalry among alienated black slaves. That rivalry opposed slaves of different masters who proudly identified themselves with their respective masters. Therefore, whenever slaves of different masters met on occasions, they would engage in harsh debates. Slaves, being mentally impacted by the stereotypes of the Whites' superiority, always lauded the richness and smartness of their particular white masters over the masters of the other slaves. He goes on saying that whenever

slaves of different masters met, they regularly disputed, and each supported their respective masters which sometimes ended in scuffles and fighting: “These quarrels would almost always end in a fight between the parties” (Douglass, 1845, p. 17). It means that the fact of confronting each other in support of their respective white masters shows how destabilized the mindsets of the enslaved Blacks were under the yoke of slavery. In other words, they were even ready to fight one another for the sake of their respective masters. Then, according to these alienated slaves, slaves of wealthy masters were also better than those owned by less wealthy masters. All in all, it can be assumed that the enslavement of Africans and their progenies had cost them a lot of traumatic disturbances.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the enslavement of Africans was marked by the intentional dislocation of their families for a number of reasons. The investigation has evinced that the practice of slaves’ family dislocation was motivated by three main factors. Firstly, it has been exposed that the white enslavers had engaged in the heartbreaking venture in order to depreciate the human status of the enslaved Blacks and had in the process used the allegation of the inferiority of the black race as a justification of the enslavement of the latter. Secondly, the study has demonstrated another unequivocal reason behind the disintegration of slaves’ family which was the enslavers’ willingness to break the spirit and the innate family affection of slaves, rendering them unresponsive to the true family love and affection. Accordingly, such dislocated slave families would become more submissive and more productive to the greatest delight of the white masters. All in all, the ultimate and the most important reason behind the disruption of slaves’ families was economic. So by destroying slaves’ family, the white enslavers were sure that this would render them docile, unreactive and more inclined to obey orders which would eventually result in generating more profits to the great delight of the slave masters. Besides, the enslavement of slaves along with the destruction of their families had culminated in the mental traumas for the poor Blacks, which was manifested in alienation and assimilation.

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