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Legitimizing the Self: The Hermeneutics of Sacred Texts in Omar ibn Said's and Jeffery Brace's Autobiographies

Abstract

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There has been a resurgence of interest in slave narratives, which are now viewed as an integral part of the American tradition and culture. Many manuscripts are being reinvestigated to reveal the role of slaves in the making of America. This essay adds to this tradition by highlighting slave's use of religious sacred texts to achieve their equality with their oppressors, hence reclaiming their humanity and authorial voice while annihilating the oppressive Christian discourse that justifies slavery. Two texts are examined against a background of philosophical hermeneutics: Omar ibn Said's and Jeffery Brace's autobiographies. Although Said and Brace were contemporaries, they never met and had different slavery experiences and religious backgrounds, they both make similar statements using verses from the Qur'an and the Bible that defy and deconstruct Christian claims that justify slavery. A hermeneutic analysis of the verses they quote reveals how they target the institution of slavery to expose its hypocrisy, discrepancy, and injustices directed towards slaves.

Keywords: Jeffery Brace, Omar ibn Said, slave narrative, philosophical hermeneutics, sacred texts



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شرعة الذات: تأويل (هرمنيوطيقا) النصوص المقدسة في السير الذاتية لعمر بن

سعيد و جيفري بريس

محمود رفعت عبدالله محمود

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مستخلص الدراسة

ثمة اهتمام متزايد بسرديات العبيد و التي ينظر لها الآن علي أنها جزء أصيل من الثقافة والموروث الأمريكيين، فمزيد من الدراسات تتناول مخطوطات و مطبوعات العبيد بالدراسة والتحليل للكشف عن دور العبيد في تكوين أمريكا، و هذه الدراسة تضيف لذلك التوجه و هي تركز علي إبراز استخدام العبيد لاقتباسات من النصوص الدينية لتحقيق قدر من المساواة مع ساداتهم ما من شأنه استعادة قدر من آدميتهم التي سلبتها العبودية و كذلك تحقيق قدر من الاستقلالية في التعبير عن الذات و الأهم من ذلك تفويض الخطاب المسيحي الغربي الذي برر العبودية آنذاك في تناقض واضح مع تعاليم الديانة المسيحية، تتناول الدراسة بالتحليل نصين من سرديات العبيد الأمريكيين من أصول إفريقية هما السيرة الذاتية لكل من عمر بن سعيد و جيفري بريس و تتخذ الدراسة من نظرية التأويل الفلسفي (الهرمنيوطيقا الفلسفية) لهانز جورج جادامير منهجا، و علي الرغم من أن سعيد و بريس كانا معاصرين فإنهما لم يلتقيا قط و كانت تجاربهم الحياتية كعبيد و خلفياتهم الدينية مختلفة و متناقضة إلي حد بعيد إلا أن كلاهما ساق اقتباسات من القرآن الكريم و الكتاب المقدس لدحض المزاعم التي تؤيد العبودية، و التحليل التأويلي لتلك الاقتباسات من النصوص المقدسة يشير إلي إدانة كل من سعيد و بريس لمنظومة العبودية الأمريكية بالنقد اللاذع و الإدانة بالنفاق و التناقض و الظلم البين الذي مورس لعقود طويلة علي العبيد الأفارقة.

الكلمات الرئيسية: جيفري بريس، عمر بن سعيد، سرديات العبيد، التأويل الفلسفي (الهرمنيوطيقا الفلسفية)، النصوص المقدسة

By: Mahmoud Refaat Abd-Ellah

Legitimizing the Self: The Hermeneutics of Sacred Texts in Omar ibn Said's and Jeffery Brace's Autobiographies

In the wake of the twenty-first century, racial tensions in the United States continue to exist. Issues of identity and hyphenation still take central position. In this turbulent context of postmodernity, a return to the origins proves to be significantly relevant. It is widely believed that it is quite difficult to understand the present without revisiting the past. Like so many issues that face nations, the past of a nation might have the right answers to why it is what it is. Experiences of the past remain as valid and relevant today as they used to be when they took place. The African American experience is deeply rooted in the history of the United States which cannot be understood without understanding this experience which is interwoven in its fabric. Slave narratives stand unique in recording this major and primary part of the African American experience. Narratives that remained neglected, unread, or even lost for a few centuries before gaining recognition as means to communicate the story of slavery from the point of view of the oppressed, the wretched, and the tyrannized. They offer an alternative discourse, a counter narration that defies the White hegemony. Four centuries after the first slaves landed on the shores of Virginia, slave narratives are still relevant. They are a record of America in the making, and to understand contemporary America, that part of the nation's memory should be revisited.

The (re)discovery of lost texts written by slaves stirs further interest in the experience of slavery which was ignored and left unrecorded till the nineteenth century and recognize their contribution in the American culture. Cases in point are the narratives of Omar ibn Said and Jeffery Brace which were written in 1831 and 1810 respectively: both kidnapped from Africa,

survived the Middle Passage, were enslaved in the US, albeit leading different slavery experiences. Omar ibn Said was transported across the Atlantic as an old man, while Jeffery Brace was a mere African teenager. Omar spent most of his bondage time as a house slave while Brace fought his way out of the Civil war, gained his freedom, bought his own farm, and lived among White Vermonters as a free man of color.

The two men never met in their lifetime, and in spite of such differences of their fates their lives and autobiographies have several things in common, but the most obvious is how the lives of these two men—and many others—could have and have shaped America. Said with his Islamic background and literacy in Arabic and Brace with his African semi-noble descent and fight in the revolution have been part of the making of the nation. Both left written accounts of their experiences, one in Arabic the other in English. The most obvious aspect of their written accounts is their reliance on sacred texts from the Qur'an and the Holy book to imply messages against their enslavers and the institution of slavery. On a strange land, struggling for their lives and freedom, they find themselves in a constant fight for self-identification and legitimation against a system that marginalizes and dehumanizes them.

This paper assumes that what Said and Brace experience is a legitimation crisis, in the Habermasian ¹ sense of the concept, on the individual level which while does not invalidate the social system they found themselves in, it reflects an internal conflict they went through, whereby they cannot approve of the social structure enforced upon them, nor can they secure their independence. Whether they were conscious of such a crisis or not does not make a difference, since a legitimation crisis does not have to be explicit or recognized by even those who face it (Kateb, 1979, p. 696). Alternatively, Said and Brace seek another form of legitimation that empowers them and allows them authority under such a social structure. For Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) “authority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned” (281). Said

and Brace seek legitimation from the sacred texts which offer them a way out of this crisis, by earning their own authority. Both are faced by a social order that they redeem illegitimate, and hence find themselves in need of a counter narrative that secures their own voice and offers a more legitimate order that achieves for them equality.

It is safe to propose that the institution of slavery posed the first legitimation crisis on the American scene. Such a system is based on a false assumption that humans are property and worth capital and were used to fuel a capitalist system. This very basis allows slave masters to take full advantage of fellow humans who happen to be held captives. There are two wrong things with such a social hierarchy: it gives one party full authority while deprives the other of all authority. Such a social hierarchy creates a legitimation crisis, according to Jürgen Habermas, since it robs certain individuals of all rights, social practices, and labor opportunities, who eventually redeem such a regime illegitimate for them.

For Habermas both the political and economic systems co-support and mutually sustain one another (Peregrine, 1996, p. 256). There is no way for a slave caught up between these two systems to sustain a central position, an authority, or a high self-esteem based on the standards of such a system. However, “the political system can control everything except people’s ‘rational’ minds, and crises in any part of the system are going to tend to produce crises in legitimation, precisely because it cannot be readily controlled” (Peregrine, 1996, p. 256). According to Habermas (1992) “the cultural system is peculiarly resistant to administrative control. There is no administrative production of meaning.” (p. 70). That is, cultural production remains beyond the control of both the economic and administrative systems and retains an amount of independence. Slaves who find themselves subjected to such control, seek their self-realization beyond the limitations of such realm of political-economic subjugation to the unlimited potential of the cultural system, only having their rationality against the system and

consequently try to find a way to achieve their independence from such a system they redeem illegitimate, even if they can only achieve that independence mentally, rationally, or spiritually.

To achieve this cultural meaning, spiritual independence, and self-legitimation, both Brace and Said resort to sacred texts from the Bible and the Qur'an in their attempt to condemn and disdain the institution of slavery, the injustices that comes along with their bondage, and extend the authority of the sacred texts to themselves. This paper assumes that such verses are selectively inserted by Said and Brace, in their narratives, to deliver certain messages to their audiences and that such verses deliver more than their exegetical meanings within the context of a slave narrative. It is their way of legitimizing the self against the institution of slavery. By legitimizing the self, they delegitimize the oppressing institution of slavery, they deconstruct it and reveal its hypocrisy and how contradictory it is in comparison to what is instructed by the sacred texts.

Philosophical Hermeneutics is in alignment with such assumptions. It is largely influenced by the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer who argues against method and technique shifting to general hermeneutics with a "unique emphasis on how understanding is mediated through language and tradition" while suggesting that "all understanding is hermeneutical" (Porter & Robinson , 2011, p. 11). Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutical model does not attempt to achieve a final textual interpretation but rather to get into the realm of interpretation to investigate such dialogic relationship between the author, the text, and the interpreter.

In their criticism of hermeneutics, Steven Knapp, and Walter Benn Michaels (1987) assume that "[f]or hermeneutics, a text means what its author intends but also necessarily means more, acquiring new meanings as readers apply it to new situations" (p. 50). Gadamer (2004) confirms that indeed "[n]ot just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author" and hence meaning is a productive, rather than reproductive activity (p.

296). What Knapp and Michaels fail to recognize, however, is that we do not formulate a new meaning or “transpose ourselves into the author’s mind” but rather attempt to “transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying could be right” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 292). So, a reader or interpreter does not assume an authorial position and create new meanings of a text but tends to envision the perspective that enabled its creation, eventually being able to check his assumptions from that point of view. In a way, an interpreter is like “a judge [who] regards himself as entitled to supplement the original meaning of the text of a law, he is doing exactly what takes place in all other understanding” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 336). That makes the task of hermeneutics filling the gaps in understanding and meaning in application.

However, that does not mean that meaning changes over time or that our historical understanding of meaning differs from the understanding of early readers. It just means that meaning is not fixed and that it is “present-related, arising in the hermeneutical situation.” (Palmer, 1969, p. 184), as “[t]here is not interpretation without relationship to the present, and this is never permanent and fixed.” (Palmer, 1969, p. 183). Based on this view, a text should be also read in relation to the contemporary context, while envisioning the perspective from which the text is created. Gadamer’s model “seeks to establish a dialectic or open-ended questioning and answering between the past and present, the text and the interpreter, without aiming at a final or complete interpretation.” (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p. 11), and hence keeps the past experiences alive in the present. However, for Gadamer, judicial and theological hermeneutics approach the act of interpretation not as an attempt to go back in time but as “an effort to span the distance between a text and the present situation.” (Palmer, 1969, p. 188). Thus, the text remains relevant and applicable to new situations that were not foreseen by the original author.

Indeed, the study of slave narratives is relevant today as a record of such a human experience. It offers a better understanding of race tensions and socio-cultural and religious composition of the American society as well as a new insight into the experience of slavery and how slaves found ways to criticize their oppressors. Such strategies are still valid today and are employed by the oppressed, marginalized, and subjugated populations in the American society, or pretty much any other social hierarchy for that matter. This necessitates a closer study of such oppressed voices of the past since any understanding of the American or African American experiences is deeply tied to understanding its history and past experiences. Michael C. Dawson (2016) argues that the current legitimization crisis that the United States faces in the twenty-first century cannot be understood outside the paradigm of racial relationships and that it is deeply rooted in the American history and emanates from the “*intersection* of racial domination, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation.” (p. 144). Such a capitalist exploitation, to a large part of the black communities, started with the first recorded landing of African slaves in Virginia in 1619, marking the beginning of a new social hierarchy based on racism and slavery, along with colonial expansion. The institution of slavery fueled American capitalism ever since, creating a succession of legitimization crises.

Habermas (1992) argues that “[a]fter the capitalist mode of production has been established, the exercise of the state’s power within the social system can be limited . . . to the protection of bourgeois commerce . . . [and] the shielding of the market mechanism from self-destructive side effects” (p. 21). Such protection of the state to the capitalist system surely disrupts the social order and discontents the less privileged groups who do not benefit from such protection or enjoy the privileges of the capitalist elite, eventually leading to legitimization crises. Dawson (2016) further explains that disruption of one domain such as the racial order can lead to disruptions in other domains like the capitalist social order, eventually undermining

the legitimacy of the state, edging the system towards crisis (p. 145). It is also argued that “racial and ethnic logics are generating crises as deep and perhaps even more dangerous than those of capital, reproduction, the ecology, or politics.” (Dawson, 2016, p. 145). Such arguments necessitate highlighting historical contexts to investigate how social members of a society face such legitimization crises.

One obvious example of applying a contemporary historical context to a text is the Gospel, in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and by extension any other sacred text. In Gadamer’s theological and legal hermeneutics “there is an essential tension between the fixed text—the law or the gospel—on the one hand and, on the other, the sense arrived at by applying it at the concrete moment of interpretation, either in judgment or in preaching.” (307). While the sacred text remains fixed, the meaning is attached to the hermeneutical moment and only emerges at such a moment of application and context:

the gospel does not exist in order to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in such a way that it exercises its saving effect. This implies that the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly—i.e., according to the claim it makes—must be understood every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application” (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 307-308).

This is particularly relevant to understanding sacred verses included in both Said’s and Brace’s autobiographies. Such a conceptualization offers an opportunity to understand both the autobiographies and the sacred verses they quote in a new light: can a sacred text be an empowering tool and a legitimizing device for slaves? What could a verse from the Qur’an, or the Bible mean differently within the context of a slave narrative? What could Omar ibn Said or Jeffery Brace intended to deliver to their audiences by quoting such verses? What

interpretations a sacred text reveals when deliberately used in a slave narrative? What does ibn Said and Brace achieve, textually, by including Qur'anic and Biblical verses in their narratives? These are some of the questions this paper answers.

Despite the different circumstances and slavery experience, Said and Brace have one thing in common: quoting sacred texts from both the Qur'an and the Bible. This paper, however, does not incorporate the religious mainstream interpretations of the sacred texts, although it utilizes their exegeses as guidelines for how they are understood by scholars and men of religion. A verse is an inspiration, that at the time of or within the context of their revelation is understood to communicate a certain meaning or set of meanings. The use of sacred texts in Both Said's and Brace's autobiographies enforces a theological reading of such texts against the background of slavery. That's the role of hermeneutics, to read sacred texts within the context of a slavery experience, and find out what meanings such verses might acquire and which messages might be intercepted to the audience. According to Gadamer, "the task of hermeneutics was to adapt the text's meaning to the concrete situation to which the text is speaking" (2004, p. 307). Once quoted, a sacred verse ceases to be read on its own and becomes a part of the text it is quoted in, the slave narrative itself in this case. And hence no longer can it be read on its own but has to be read as a part of such a text.

Said and Brace probably have been conscious of addressing a Christian religious audience. Hence a focus on a religious discourse and sacred texts was deemed appropriate, appealing to the uncontested authority of teachings, commands, and interdictions of religion. Both derive legitimacy from the word of God. For hermeneutical purposes, "[s]cripture is the word of God, and that means it has an absolute priority over the doctrine of those who interpret it." (Gadamer, 2004, p. 326). That is, the scripture, and by extension the Qur'an or any other holy book, rules over any other text, belief, or ideology. The sacred text is the highest authority,

the source of doctrine, teachings, and beliefs, for those who believe in it.

Slave masters' usage of the scripture to condemn Africans as sinner brutes, can only be reversed by a similar strategy. So, if the holy books are proven to condemn slavery, the proslavery discourse is eventually deconstructed. A new discourse that empowers slaves can then be reconstructed. Direct quotes from holy books saves both Said and Brace the difficulty of directing criticism to either benefactors or masters while sparing themselves fending for textual authority which is preordained and beyond challenge. After all, it's the word of God, directly taken from the Bible or the Qur'an, so it is granted an undebatable authority for whoever believes in them.

Both Said and Brace identify themselves based on religious standards and judge their captors/enslavers, accordingly, based on how far they adhere to the teachings of Islam or Christianity. Brace (2004) states that it's after his conversion when he has leisure time to devote to Biblical study, and the first thing he learns from the scripture is "Moses' declaration 'the Lord our God, has no respect of persons.'" (p. 178), citing verses 34-36 of the "tenth chapter of the Acts of the apostles" (p. 178) which indicate God does not discriminate against people, all are equal in Godly sight, and that all righteous works are accepted, and the message of the Christ is to everyone without discrimination:

34. Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons:

35 But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." (Brace, 2004, p. 178)

Brace, thus, deconstructs racism and racial hierarchies, by establishing a sense of absolute equality, and righteousness as the yardstick of judgement.

Said's conceptualization of race is not very different from Brace's. For him, piety is the

measure, not color or lineage. His view of race is in accordance with the Hadith “O people, your Lord is one and your father Adam is one. There is no favor of an Arab over a foreigner, nor a foreigner over an Arab, and neither white skin over black skin, nor black skin over white skin, except by righteousness” (Al-Bayhaqi, 2000, p. 289) and the Qur’anic verse “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allāh is that (believer) who has *At-Taqwā* [i.e. he is one of *Al-Muttaqūn* (the pious)]” (Qur’an, 2019-2020, 49:13). Omar refers to his first master as an evil man who did not fear god, and for him, an evil man is not evil because he is white, but because he does not fear God. Fearing God, being the epitome of piety in Islam, is the measure of favoring or disfavoring people.

Omar envisions the world through a religious lens. For him, religion is a crucial identity definer that defines him as well as others. When the big army comes to his country, they kill many and walk him to the sea where he is sold “into the hands of a Christian man (*Nasrani*)”, who takes him to the big ship and sails him across the big sea (the Atlantic Ocean) to a country (Charleston) where a *Christian* language is spoken, and he’s eventually sold into the hands of an evil *infidel* (*Kafir*) man, “who did not fear Allah at all” (Said, 2011, Life). As a Muslim, Omar probably classifies others into three categories: Muslims, the People of the Book (Christians and Jews), and infidels (those who believe in no revealed religion). For him, it’s “Christian Language” not English and “the country of Christians” not America. The same goes for Arabic that he had learned for “religious purposes, presumably the language of Islam. As a result, language and religion are conflated for him” (Osman and Forbes, 2004, p. 341). He applies the same principle to English which, for him, is mainly spoken by Christians, and hence must be the Christian language, just like Arabic is the Islamic language. It is not geography that defines Omar’s world, but religion, or the lack of it per se.

Said's use of Qur'anic verses is also defying to the beliefs of his Christian masters. The choice of such verses is even more defying: "Blessed be He in whose hand is the *mulk* and who has power over all things" (Said, 2011, Life). The blessings here go for Allah, in whose hand is the *mulk*, a unique concept which represents an utter complete superiority and prevalence over everything. *Al malek* is one of the holy names of Allah, in Islam, which literally suggests He solely *owns* and rules over everything and everybody, dismissing any assumed power of human beings over the universe or other fellow humans. By presenting such concepts, Omar alludes to the Islamic realization of slavery to God, that all humans are mere slaves to the almighty God in "whose hand is the *mulk*". Osman and Forbes (2004) suggest that "by giving God dominion and ownership (*al-mulk*), Omar de-emphasizes the significance of his position as a slave by highlighting that all human beings are ultimately owned by God." (p. 338).

Brace's position is no less defying than Said's. He quotes Psalm 127:1-4 to suggest that everyone who "feareth the Lord" and "walketh in his ways" is blessed "For thou shalt eat the labor of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee." (Brace, 2004, p.108). Obviously, Brace (2004) hints at the slave masters who do not eat from the labor of their hands, and rely on the work of their slaves for that, and indeed they are not blessed for not walking the ways of the Lord, according to this Biblical vision, since they practice such injustices against their slaves that Brace (2004) recounts: kidnapping innocent women and children, marrying an African princess and selling her as a slave (pp. 32, 130), deceiving generous oblivious Africans onboard a slavery ship, drugging, and shackling them before sailing them as slaves (pp. 124-25), whipping and torturing slaves (p. 137), raping women in front of their husbands (p. 127), and constant hunger that accompanies him throughout his enslavement (pp. 122, 126, 129-30, 137, 153), along other atrocities and horrors that occurred throughout the Middle Passage and Brace's life as a slave.

Said, however, shocked by the horrors of the Middle passage, omits from his narrative such details as well as the treatment he received in Charleston. He must have developed antagonistic feelings towards the Western (Christian) culture which enslaved him that he attempts to deconstruct this inhumane system which victimizes him by raising the issue of dominion, dispossessing fellow humans, removing from their hands the power to dominate him, and eventually emerges spiritually free and empowered. Akel Kahera (2014) suggests that the verses while transferring power from slave masters to God enables Omar to undermine Christian justifications for slavery while empowering himself, and that the use of *Surat al-Mulk* “is a strategic part of the text’s excoriating message against the institution of slavery” (p. 130). An analysis which is in conformity with Edward E. Curtis’s (2009) opinion that “[i]n the historical context in which Omar was writing, it would not be unreasonable to interpret such statements as antislavery sentiments—the concept that dominion belongs completely to God, not to other men.” (p. 13). Osman and Forbes (2004) go further to analyze Omar’s selection of *al-Mulk* verses as providing “solace to slavery in the recognition that supreme sovereignty rests with God alone, rather than with any slave master” (p. 339).

The selection of the Qur’anic verses, however, is far from random or coincidental. Omar, apparently, intentionally picks the verses that takes power from the hands of his masters and puts them right into the hands of God, promising those who do not comply the utmost torture in hell. He does not interpret the verses, but obviously they support his belief in a superior just power that “might put you to the proof and find out which of you had the best work” (Said, 2011, Life). Kahera (2014) suggests that the choice of verses “encapsulates the contradictions between these narrative modes, challenges the religious sanction of slavery, and undermines the practice of granting slaveholders dominion over other human beings” (p. 127). After all it is not for mortal humans to decide who “had the best work”, or who did the right

thing (Said, 2011, Life). That completely strips slave masters of such boasted authority and supremacy, putting them where they belong, from his point of view, into the hands of God. For him, God represents the power that has “prepared the scourge of Fire for these, and the scourge of Hell for those who deny their Lord” (Said, 2011, Life), those who do not accept such mulk (dominance) of al-Malek (the dominant). Who he thinks they are, Omar never says, but the verses warn all those who deny, or rather debate Godly dominance by assuming a similar authority to better prepare themselves for the scourge of hell. As a slave, he does not believe he is not equal and refuses to accept the dominance of any other entity except that of God. The same can be said of Brace whose editor states that “[t]he scripture is inserted by the request of the narrator” (Brace, 2001, p. 183). It is far from achieving figurative effect, and it is made clear such insertions are intentional. Kari J. Winter (2004) even argues that “Brace based his search for meaning—psychologically, politically, and ontologically—on reading and rereading the Bible” (p. 8). It is beyond doubt that the Bible formed a major construct in Brace’s moral and spiritual understanding of the world, just like the Qur’an did for Said.

Although Said does not describe the circumstances of his capture or the details of his voyage across the Atlantic, he does not fail to recognize his captors as Christians. Like Said, Brace identifies his captors as Christian: “in the 16th year of my age, I was borne away from native innocence, ease, and luxury, into captivity, by a christian people, who preach humility, charity, and benevolence.” (Brace, 2004, p. 119), ironically pointing out the disparity between the preaches and deeds of his Christian captors. Identifying them as Christians and not merely whites is a criticism to the Christian conscience which allowed such atrocities to happen. Brace, however is capable of forgiving: “Father! forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Brace, 2004, p. 119). Kari J. Winter (2004) notes that by “[q]uoting Christ’s cry from the cross, Brace connects himself with Christ’s suffering as well as his forgiveness” (p. 119). By

evoking the figure of crucified Jesus Brace identifies himself as a Christian, a legitimate heir to the legacy of the Christ, and adheres to a more humane version of Christianity where a slave can forgive his oppressors. Said does not show his first master a similar spirit, although he praises his late masters for treating him well, which casts a shadow of doubt over the authenticity of his conversion to Christianity. George H. Callcott (1954) suggests that Omar's conversion was a strategy to please his Christian master (p. 62). This sounds logical with Omar flattering his masters Jim Owen and John Owen for treating him well, almost equally, indirectly hinting on their compliance with the Islamic model of equality: "for whatever they eat, I eat; and whatever they wear they give me to wear" (Said, 2011, Life). This resonates the Qur'anic verse: "[f]or its expiation [of oaths], feed ten *Masākīn* (needy persons), on a scale of the average of that with which you feed your own families, or clothe them or manumit a slave" (2019-2020, 5:89).

But Said had never been emancipated, so he probably could not criticize his masters harshly or directly anyways. Brace, however, wrote his autobiography after his manumission and it was published two years after the abolition, and hence exercised greater freedom criticizing his former masters mainly against a background of Christian teachings. He severely criticizes this hypocrisy of his first American master "John Burrell, a professed puritan" who only fed him "old crusts and bones as people generally throw to their dogs"; this master was too harsh that Brace "almost perished with cold and hunger" (Brace, 2004, p. 153) as he was left with no protection from the cold of Connecticut. That master however, "would read the bible and pray both night and morning, for all mankind, recommend all to the sovereign mercy of the father of the universe" and on Sundays "he would dress himself, put on his best coat and wig, go to meeting, there sit and appear to suck in every word the minister should say." (Brace, 2004, p. 153).

Brace (2004) illustrates this disparity between how that master treated him while keeping an appearance of piety and dedication to the teachings of the Bible: “If he had charity, that crown of christian virtues, how could he pray for all mankind and then starve a poor negro boy . . . If he had a hope of grace and mercy from his Lord and Master, how could he freeze his slave, and then unmercifully beat him” (p. 154). When Brace is rescued from this situation by one Mr. Samuel Eals, he just makes a reference to “Isaiah, 58 chap. 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7th verses—Amos, 5th verse 25th.” (Brace, 2004, p. 154), but does not directly quote the verses as if encouraging his readers to be actively involved in the hermeneutical process, read the verses from the Bible themselves, and make the hermeneutic effort to get his perspective.

The Isaiah 58:3-7 verses are about sincerity of worship, and that the ritual alone does not count since it has to reflect the intended spirit of being good to others by feeding the hungry and feeling for the unfortunate and impoverished:

3 Wherefore have we fasted, *say they*, and thou seest not? *wherefore* have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.

4 Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as *ye do this* day, to make your voice to be heard on high.

5 Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? *is it* to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes *under him*? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?

6 *Is* not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

7 *Is it* not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast

out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (*King James Study Bible*, 2013, 58:3-7)

It's not the show of piety that matters, in this case of Isaiah 58 the ritual of fasting and afflicting one's soul, which are not acknowledged by the Lord because their fasting lacks compassion to others and disengagement from worldly pleasures. Their fasting is questionable for not reflecting the true spirit of fasting. The same goes for Burrell whose hypocrisy is described by Eals as "inhuman and unchristian" (Brace, 2004, p. 154).

In these verses, the people ask why heaven is not intervening and why circumstances do not work in their favor in spite of their fasting and prayers. The Christian people are warned against "exact all your labours", and "smite with the fist of wickedness" (*King James Study Bible*, 2013, 58:3-4) which is just against the nature of true fasting and worshipping, for true faith is extended beyond the believer to others who are needy. God's *chosen* and accepted fasting is meant to "loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?", to "deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" (*King James Study Bible*, 2013, 58:6-7). The verses warn "that religious practice is worse than useless if not accompanied by true social justice" and that social justice practices are expected from "the upper strata of society" who "had the leisure to attend to them" (Coggins, 2007, p. 480). The verses also recount everything suffering afflicted on Brace by his Puritan master who leaves him hungry, cast, and naked, pointing out such hypocrisy's.

Unlike Brace who directly targets fellow Christians with Biblical criticism, Omar had to be more subtle with his criticism. For the most part, Omar derives more from his Islamic legacy than he does from his late Christian learnings. This is to be expected, though, since

Omar was taken in bondage as an old man whose life is shaped by Islam in his early forty years of freedom. But even given that knowledge, it is surprising that Omar opens his “Life”, just like any regular Muslim would, with Basmala² and blessings for the prophet Mohammad of Islam: “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. May God bless our Lord (sayyidina) Mohammad” (Said, 2011, Life). God, here, stands for the English translation of Allah, which is exactly the title used by Omar. “[O]ur Lord” (Said, 2011, Life), which also reads ‘our master’, is a straightforward denial of the supremacy of fellow humans (including slave masters) except for Allah and prophet Mohammad. He calls nobody else sayyidina, except Jesus Christ, keeping in mind that syada (lordship, or mastery) is reserved for those two hegemonic domains (Allah and the Prophet) who enjoy unparalleled superiority for the average Muslim, along with other prophets. For Said, and fellow Muslims, if Allah or the prophet say something then it is true, undeniable, and must be followed. Not only does Omar reserve lordship to Allah, but the very use of the pronoun “our” is inclusive of all human beings including slaves like himself and masters like his. For the remainder of the manuscript, he continues to include himself on a basis of shared humanity, ignoring the reality of his enslavement.

Said’s play with words continues to be his mightiest defensive strategy against his state of bondage. After all, his words were all he had got to resist with, and he had to use them carefully in order to make desirable impressions on his enslavers while retaining the authenticity of his belief and delivering implicit messages to his potential audience(s). He takes advantage of his knowledge of Arabic, obviously a language that his masters do not speak, and manipulates it “rendering various readings possible” (Osman and Forbes, 2004, p. 337). Pun remains one of his key strategies as he creates a pun by a series of different signifiers that refer to ambiguous entities, such as Allah, God, and Lord. He uses the word “Lord” both in his

Islamic and Christian prayers: “the Lord is my shepherd”, “[t]he Lord put religion in my heart”, “Allah is our Lord, our Creator, and our Owner and the restorer of our condition”, and “Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds” (Said, 2011, Life). He also uses the concept of lordship to pay reverence to both Prophet Mohammad and Jesus Christ, which does not contradict his Islamic belief as well, since Jesus Christ is already established as a prophet in Islam: “our Lord Jesus the Messiah”, “the way of the Lord Jesus the Messiah”, and “the gospel of God, our Lord” (Said, 2011, Life). So, basically, he interchangeably uses the three signifiers (Allah, Lord, and God) to refer to the same entity/signified, while they represent different religious and cultural entities. By masking a preference for one concept over the other, he masks his belief in one religion or the other, and thus obscuring his attitude. While all the three signifiers do not conflict with his Islamic belief, his Christian masters, whom he is keen not to offend, can still accept and embrace him as a true Christian convert, because such references also are not in conflict, for most part, with Christian belief either.

What Omar does here, is ambiguating his belief. To use Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s term, he makes use of the language of “signifying”. Signifying being the language of implication and indirectness mainly relying on figurative tropes such as pun and ambiguity, which are effective techniques of speaking one’s true identity, while avoiding confrontation with hegemonic powers or oppressive institutions (i.e. the institution of slavery in this case). For Gates (1989), “[t]o Signify ... is to engage in certain rhetorical games” (p. 48). Signifying is the mode of figuration in black discourse, and “the language of Signifyin(g) . . . is the vernacular term for the figurative use of language”, with the figure of the Signifying Monkey taking central position dwelling “at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language” (Gates, 1989, pp. 52, 85, 52).

For Gates, (1989) “[t]he Afro-American rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) is a

rhetorical practice that is not engaged in the game of information-giving” (p. 52), and information Omar does not give. Alternatively, he signifies to avoid giving such compelling information about his genuine faith if he is bound to embrace only one. He indulges into a game of ambiguation, masking his true belief, and obscuring his convictions, while giving his masters the impression that he is a true Christian convert, which probably made his condition more favorable. Kahera (2014) agrees that “Omar was engaged in purposeful deception and self-preservation, using Arabic as a language of dissimulation to guard or preserve his life in a time of danger” (p. 130). Omar’s autobiography “is a document full of dissimulation, the hiding of one’s true religious identity” (Curtis, 2009, p. 13). Omar takes refuge in the language that had shaped his identity, and the texts that he knows best to combat his defeated position as a powerless slave.

He tends to be selective about what to say and what not to say, making use of antanaclasis, as Gates (1989) describes it, which “turns upon the very identity of these signifiers, and the play of differences generated by the unrelated concepts (the signifieds) for which they stand” (p. 45). On the surface, the concept of lordship seems to be identical in both Islam and Christianity, that is giving in to a supreme power, but digging deeper into the concepts they are not inherently the same. Being a Lord, Jesus Christ is elevated to the status of a god, a semi-god, or the son of God, while none of that applies to Prophet Mohammad as a Lord. The way Prophet Mohammad is a lord does not match the way Jesus Christ, or rather the Messiah, is a Lord. For Omar, both are revered figures, but none is a Lord in a way that resonates with the lordship of the supreme Lord/God; both are lords in a way that allows them due respect and privilege over common believers, but neither is a God. Said, persists that “[m]ay God bless our Lord (sayyidina) Mohammad” (Said, 2011, Life), but this comes nowhere near saying that “our Lord Mohammad” is actually a God or a son of God, but rather

he is merely a recipient of blessings from the sole and only God.

Because all these signifieds (i.e. Allah, Lord, God, Jesus Christ, and Prophet Mohammad) bear the same signifier (i.e. lord), Gates's (1989) dreadful, and rather playful, condition of ambiguity (p. 45) is due to occur. For Omar, though, it is not as dreadful, since it is his way to defy hegemonic impositions and stress his value and identity as a human being, rather than an enslaved object. Kahera (2014) draws attention to a very interesting concept that "even critical accounts attentive to the complexity of Omar's relationship to Christianity fail to account for an important Arabic rhetorical strategy of concealing one's true faith—a strategy known as *idtitar* (and *taqiyyah*) in Arabic—which is an important feature of all of Omar's writings as he sought to defy a web of power relations and social pressures" (p. 130). *Taqiyyah* literally translates as prudence or fear, a strategy followed by Muslims whenever they fear for their lives or religious expression in the face of oppressive unfriendly powers, and it allows them to freely conceal, mask, or even forge their true faith to avoid confrontation with overtly oppressive powers.

Omar takes every opportunity to stress his identity and belonging to a culture that is different from his masters'. When he resorts to signifying, he intentionally uses Christian concepts that do not contradict his Islamic faith. For example, his use of the word "Lord" is not in conflict with his Islamic belief but raises no doubts about his Christian belief either, while being synonymous to, albeit different from, the Islamic concept of lordship: the Lord, or Allah, in Arabic is the sole creator and master of the universe, the same thing can be said of the Lord in Christianity, but issues like trinity and godhead of Jesus contradict and contrast his Islamic belief, and hence such decisive issues are altogether avoided. Omar rejects such beliefs, possibly imposed by his masters, by simply avoiding them. Such avoidance cannot be spontaneous since these are key Christian beliefs that clashes with his Islamic doctrine. By

claiming that he is Christian without believing in the trinity or godliness of Jesus, is very misleading and intentionally ambiguous. Ala Alryyes (2011) rightfully notes, in his introduction to the manuscript, that Omar “never alludes to the godhead of Jesus or to his crucifixion, which Islam reject” (Introduction). But that probably does not mean he esteems one belief over the other, or that he rejects or even adopts Christianity entirely. More realistically, he makes compromises, adopting and reconciling certain beliefs from both religions: “Omar strategically both identifies and disidentifies with the Christian/Westerners by whom he was surrounded and influenced. What we discover is that through his specific uses of Qur’ānic references, he maintains a distinction between himself as Muslim and the Westerners/Christians (Osman and Forbes, 2004, p. 332). Such distinction mainly emanates from his lack of freedom of choice. We do not know for sure in what way his masters imposed Christianity upon him, but they certainly made it a favorable option; offering him an Arabic translated bible, was more than suggestive. As a mature man, he would have realized that assuming a new identity adapted to the masters’ faith is a strategy that would bring him a better treatment and more advantageous enslavement circumstances.

This is a point of difference between Brace and Said, though. Said does not refer to the trinity or to Christ as son of God or as God so as not to contradict his Islamic belief. Brace, however, embraces Christianity fully. He accepts Jesus as his savior, quoting Mathew 3:16-17:

16 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up strait way out of the water: and Lo! the Heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him.

17 And Lo! a voice from Heaven, saying, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased (Brace, 2004, p. 182).

Not only does Brace recall the image of crucifixion of the Christ on the cross to parallel his

own misery, he also recalls the scene of baptizing the Christ to parallel his own baptism. He positions his baptism story and the baptism verses to be the closing incident of his narrative to suggest he finally found salvation after so much misery and struggles. He actually comments:

Believing it my duty as much as possible to follow the examples of the savior, I was convinced by the foregoing scripture that plunging or being immersed in water was the true baptism contemplated in the gospel. Therefore, I concluded to follow the example (in this respect) of the redeemer (Brace, 2004, p. 182).

Although Jesus is assumed to be sinless, and baptism is a confession of sin, Jesus submits to fulfill the prophecy which is a fulfillment of righteousness. By being baptized, Brace also seeks this righteousness, again evoking the image of the Christ, as if fulfilling a prophecy himself. Again, Brace extends the image of the Christ to himself, following his path, and hence endowing himself with an aura of legitimation that comes along with such image. Baptism, also, indicates a rebirth, a resurrection, and life after death. It presents hope after an era of oppression. Brace chooses to end his narrative with hope for a new life and salvation.

As a matter of fact Brace uses similar analogies to establish himself as a legitimate fellow Christian, not only in belief but in lineage and spiritual connection to the Christ. It is already suggested that “enslaved people interpreted the Bible, especially the Exodus story, as a metaphor for their own difficult lives and as promise of eventual liberation.” (Grendler, Leiter, and Sexton, 2021). Brace follows the same pattern when he describes his exodus from Africa to parallelize the Israelite exodus from Egypt as in Exodus 18:1: “1. When Jethro the priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses, and for Israel his people, and that the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt” (Brace, 2004, p. 115). In spite of the difference between the two incidents as the Israelites exodus was to seek freedom and Brace’s exodus was an imposed slavery, it is still a valid metaphor, since the Israelites were

chased out of Egypt and in a way it was a forced removal. The Exodus book “relates the story of freedom for God’s people from slavery and the beginning of national identity”, the story of redemption and “deliverance from bondage” (*King James Study Bible*, 2013, p. 97), and Brace makes use of them to establish a bond with this Biblical experience of bondage and freedom. Brace (2004) even goes further to give his African origins the authority over Biblical verses stating that the previous “scripture, . . . is verified by the ancient customs of my forefathers” (p. 115). Brace (2004) even suggests that the tradition of his African ancestors which was handed down from one generation to another “was anciently introduced by a great high priest of a foreign land, whose name was Ziphia . . . traced the origin of that people to the days of Noah” and that “Ziphia the high priest in our language, I understand to be Jethro, the priest of Midian, who went and lived in a foreign land, and who was father-inlaw to Moses” (p. 115). Winter (2004) suggests that by asserting this lineage to Jethro, “Brace claims a Biblical myth of origins to counter a central tenet of proslavery propaganda, the myth that Africans descended from Ham” (p. 115). Brace positions himself and his African heritage in the center of a Christian myth qualifying himself as an extension and even an authority a Biblical story claiming a distinct authorial voice from white proslavery propaganda.

While Brace establishes himself as a fellow Christian and a Christ-like figure by recalling images of common oppression, exodus, baptism, and claiming a common descendance, Said, displaced and disempowered, creates his own space, his own site of liminality that transcends such assumed polarity. Gates (1989) contends that the ‘slave, by definition, possessed at most a liminal status within the human community’ (p. 126). Such liminality becomes a site of disidentification and identification, where Omar partially loses his original identity, and acquires a new one which reconciliates both faiths. He naturalizes his relationship with Christianity, which, for him, is not the religion of infidels or *Kaffirs*.

Seemingly, he is willing to accept that part of Christianity that does not contradict his Islamic belief, though. He, as a born-Muslim, is able to see some righteousness and light in it and is willing to envisage Allah as the sole and same creator as the Lord, without jeopardizing his faith. In a way, he is able to blur the borders between the two religions, decentralizing both faiths so that neither is the center for him, anymore, and eventually dismantling the assumed polarity, where they no longer form a binary opposition. In a way, he re-structuralizes his own religious space where elements of the two religions can coexist simultaneously without contradicting each other, creating a liminal space for himself to exist beyond the community of slaves or masters.

For the anthropologist Victor Turner (1991), the “liminal *personae* or “threshold people”“ are necessarily ambiguous, eluding social classification (p. 95), and hence such “[l]iminal entities are neither here nor there”, “or maybe both . . . or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography)”; they are ““betwixt and between” all recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification” (Turner, 1986, p. 97). It is not that they refuse classification, though, albeit the lack of a defined structure or position, but they are a class of their own. Such liminal beings are suspended in a space and time of their own, where they do not belong, neither to the center nor to the margin, belong to one or the other, or belong to both synchronically.

Homi Bhabha (1994) views liminality as a passage, based on the African American artist Renée Green’s architectural representation of liminality, where the stairwell becomes a metaphorical site of interaction that constructs differences, allowing a spatio-temporal passage of movement “hither and thither” the stairwell that “prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities” (p. 4). The liminal space serves as interstices that simultaneously separate and connect different fixed (i.e., limited, non-liminal) identities, which

“opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4).

That’s where Omar finds himself, a liminal figure on an interstitial passage between two polarities (i.e. Christianity and Islam), a slave on a strange land, among strange people speaking the *Christian* language. After overcoming the initial shock of captivity and the Middle Passage, he probably realized he could not be the Muslim he used to be any more. Placed in an antagonistic position between the margin and the center, a certain amount of appropriation and adaptation must have been found necessary. So, instead of fully rejecting or embracing the new mainstream discourse he creates his own space.

Liminality is bound to generate new worlds, spaces, and identities. The liminal figure might be torn between an imposed mainstream center and a not-favored margin. Through a process of adaptation and appropriation, the liminal figure might be able to create a new space and assume a new identity, different from both the center and the margin. In Mihai Spariosu’s (1997) words, “the liminal as the cunicular may not necessarily always lead back to a center; on the contrary, it may, under certain conditions, lead away from it in a steady and irreversible fashion” since “liminality can both subsume and transcend a dialectic of margin and center” (p. 38). As a liminal figure, Omar finds himself positioned in a world of reversed order where Christianity is the center and Islam is the margin, while he himself becomes a marginalized invisible object.

It is worthy to note that the transformation from a liminal to a non-liminal condition might never happen, and the liminal figure might find himself/herself in a space of constant transformation. Likewise, the transformation that takes place in such a space can be a continuous process: “the colonized subject may dwell in the liminal space between colonial discourse and the assumption of a new “noncolonial” identity. But such identification is never

simply a movement from one identity to another, it is a constant process of engagement, contestation and appropriation” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, 117). Hence, a liminal subject might experience such appropriation endlessly.

What Omar does is creating his own religious space where he freely practices a marginalized version of Islam, cut from a community or a support system, most likely clandestinely away from the scrutiny of the imposed Christian center. Such space can be easily called a *thirdspace*. Thirdspace is conceptualized by Edward Soja (1996) as a “flexible term” as an attempt to capture “a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings” (p. 2). The concept in its simplest form transcends the historical (temporal) and social imaginations which always inform comprehension of any subject at hand, by including spatial dialectics to understand human experiences. Thirdspace, in this sense, becomes a means to interpreting socially produced space, with space occupying a central position as a key concept not limited to physical or geographical limitations.

This understanding of spatiality (whether physical or metaphorical) and Thirdspace is extended to cultural studies by Bhabha. For Bhabha (1994), cultures are impure, to begin with; there is nothing like a pure culture, hybridity is the norm. Constructed in a “contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation” cultures are rendered impure, and “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or “purity” of cultures are tenable” (p. 37). Bhabha (1990) also suggests that third space is synonymous to hybridity, both defying the originality and unity of cultures:

the act of cultural translation (both as representation and reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture, then we see that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. This third

space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom (p. 211).

Such “in-between spaces” open up the space for claiming “new signs of identity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). Third space, in Bhabha’s realization, becomes a sight of translation and negotiation; a sight of ambivalence and hybridity. A liminal state of indeterminacy that rejects totalitarian impositions while adapting to them by reformulating the self. The self is, then, realized via constant reconstruction; a process of a re-translation and re-interpretation and re-invention of the self takes place where the self emerges new, integrated within while embracing foreign constructs, transcending borders, rather than isolating the self or merely clinging to the roots. Third space crosses, blurs, and transcends boundaries. It brings into questions and challenges an assumed unity of an inherently hybrid culture. It’s a liminal in-between state of indefiniteness that refuses definition and does not allow borders where “the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One . . . nor the Other . . . but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both. This does not necessarily involve the formation of a new synthesis, but a negotiation between them” (Bhabha, 1988, p. 13).

For Omar, re-inventing space is a survival strategy, since the very definition of the self jeopardizes his existence or at least some of the privileges he enjoys as an obedient slave and presumably a Christian convert. Defining himself as a practicing Muslim, might have led to undesirable results or turned his masters against him, while willfully converting to Christianity would have been an admission of his enslavement and acceptance of the imposed identity. Third Space offers him an alternative as a universal quality that challenges definition, and that is exactly what he is after. This state of indefiniteness allows him to be elusive. He challenges

classification. The only classification he admits and likes to be judged against is slavery to a divine God who judges based on one's deeds and looks into souls rather than images. The universalism Said looks for is one of humanness.

This in-between location of Omar allows him to overcome the trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery, by resorting to God, whether as a Christian or as a Muslim, both versions of divinity validate and allow him to be, regardless of his genuine affiliation. For him, Allah and the Lord are creators and benefactors, Mohammad and Jesus are prophets and saviors. Eventually, he creates his own religious space of freedom, Islam or Christianity; maybe even both. He reconciliates both faiths and eventually reinvents a new self for himself that sustains his existence. It is not definition that he is after, but this saviorhood that promises him freedom in front of a just God that does not discriminate against people based on their color. If he cannot attain freedom in body, then to the soul he returns.

Both Brace and Said faced a legitimation crisis as slaves and followed a similar approach attempting to legitimize the self and reclaim authorial voice in their autobiographies. Both relied heavily on sacred texts to achieve such ends along with other things. While Said uses his literacy as a legitimizing tool, and so does with his religious learnings, Brace attempts to establish himself as a fellow Christian based on claimed common ancestry, and common faith of Christianity, proposing himself as a Christ-like figure. A hermeneutical analysis of their autobiographies reveals how they used sacred texts from the Bible and the Qur'an to condemn their oppressors and criticize the social system that encouraged their bondage. Both men left behind a written rich legacy as witnesses of a unique experience worthy of attention and examination.

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Notes

1 A reference to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's concept of legitimation crisis, whereby a state or a system fails to meet the socio-economic needs of its citizens or affiliates and eventually faces a decline in administrative efficiency when such affiliates redeem the institution illegal and misrepresentative.

2 Basmala is an Islamic incipit that reads in Arabic bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm and translates as 'in the name of Allah the most gracious, the most merciful', and is generally favorable to utter at the beginning of any deed, ritual, or speech by a Muslim.