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# Study of Evangelical Womanhood in Kate Drumgoold's *A Slave Girl's Story*

<sup>1</sup>Simran and <sup>2</sup>Anupama Vohra

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Jammu, Jammu, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor of English, DDE, University of Jammu, Jammu, India

### Abstract

Religion provided enslaved African Americans with refuge from oppression by aiding the black community's spiritual, secular, and political concerns and developments in America's pre- and post-Civil War period. For white women, evangelical womanhood was an alternative for usefulness and an active social life to come out of the constraints of a homely life. On the other hand, black women embraced evangelicalism to find solace from the atrocities of slavery and actively participated in the upliftment of the black community through preaching, teaching, and social service, keeping in mind their love for God and humanity. The present paper focuses on how Evangelicalism and its ideals shaped black women's (and white women's) lives in the context of Kate Drumgoold's *A Slave Girl's Story: Being An Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold*. The study presents Kate Drumgoold, Mrs. Drumgoold, and Mrs. Bettie House as the epitome of evangelical womanhood who, despite hardships, chose to follow evangelical Christianity for self-awareness and self-realisation.

**Keywords:** Evangelical womanhood, slavery, loss, white mother, self-realisation.

Slavery, the system of unpaid labour and complete servitude, existed throughout history and was practiced by tribes, cultures, civilisations, racial groups, and religions. The Atlantic slave trade of black Africans began in the mid-fifteenth century and lasted until the end of the nineteenth century. To meet the demand for a large number of labourers in the New World (North America) and to fulfil their dreams of becoming wealthy, white colonists employed black Africans as unpaid labourers to do a variety of work in agriculture

and industries. Slavery as an institution was economically and politically oriented and based on dominant racial ideology and white supremacy, exploiting and dehumanising black men, women, and children.

To resist hardships and extreme torture, over some time, enslaved people adopted different strategies that included “literacy, religion, escape, malingering, and rebellion” (Williams 62). In 1740, white Americans prohibited enslaved people from reading and writing because they thought literacy would bring “great inconveniences” (*American Slavery* 66). Slavery as a systematised institution existed and survived with the help of legislation, religious justifications, and racial bias. However, as time passed, the enslaved people adopted varied ways to resist exploitation. Between 1830 and 1870, the abolitionist movement in America raised voices for the emancipation of all enslaved people. The American Civil War, fought between the U.S. federal government and southern states, resulted in the defeat of the southern states and the abolition of slavery. On December 26, 1865, the United States of America, in the thirteenth amendment of the constitution, approved the abolition of slavery as a law: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (U.S. Constitution, amend. 13, sec. 1). The abolition and subsequent decline of slavery against the backdrop of the American Civil War in America opened new prospects and challenges in the lives of African-Americans.

Bounded in the chains of slavery, most enslaved Black people in the nineteenth century followed the spiritual path of Christianity in pursuit of solace by converting themselves to Evangelical Christianity. Evangelicalism played a crucial role in shaping the black community’s way of thinking and living in the post-Civil War era in America. Evangelicalism broadly refers to a religious approach and, during those times, focused not only on building a personal relationship with God but also emphasised how white women and black slave women constructed their relationship with God through Christianity and how this faith in God developed to build a relationship with their children, family, and the surrounding community.

Theologian Alister McGrath defines Evangelicalism by the six fundamental “controlling convictions” (55). These convictions identify “the supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God and a guide to Christian living” (55–56) and consider “the majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord and as the Savior of sinful humanity” (55–56). Evangelical Christianity emphasises the need for personal conversion and gives importance to the Christian community for “spiritual nourishment, fellowship, and growth” (55–56).

In the nineteenth century, the dominant ideology for women was “the cult of true womanhood” (Welter 21), which reinforced the concept of the ideal representation of women as virtuous, refined, and kind to their families and enslaved Black people. This established a separate “sphere” for women, wherein they were expected to follow and adhere to four virtues: “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Welter 21). The literature written for nineteenth-century women determined the roles that literature sanctioned for women. However, the examination of the roles of women in literature and behavioural code suggests that “the cult of true womanhood” (Welter 21) was restrictive and permitted only one “accepted ideal of femininity” toward which all women would strive. (qtd. in Boylan 62)

In the nineteenth century, new ideals of womanhood emerged with the proliferation of women’s groups and organisations devoted to benevolent purposes. Ronald W. Hogeland has demonstrated several distinctive lifestyles available to middle-class women that offered a choice of acceptable behaviours within these cultures: “ornamental,” “romanticized,” “radical,” and “evangelical womanhood” (Sweet 63), wherein evangelical womanhood was ascribed a “self-assertive, reform-minded posture” (63). It depicted Evangelical women as “nurturing, sensitive, and pious; more aware than men of injustice; and more capable of providing comfort to those in need” (Boylan 65). Evangelical womanhood “was a role choice whereby individuals shaped their lives around their religious convictions, forming friendships, undertaking activities, even choosing jobs that would best further their image as converted persons” (Boylan 66). Black women who willingly followed the path of spirituality and Evangelical Christianity in nineteenth-century

America embraced the notion of Evangelical womanhood to devote their lives to their community's welfare by preaching, teaching, and providing healthcare services.

Kate Drumgoold's *A Slave Girl's Story: Being an Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold* (1898) is a post-emancipation account of her experiences regarding education for herself and her community. Her narrative does not focus on her quest for physical freedom, but on her mother's experiences of bondage and freedom, which admire her as a maternal heroine and strong woman: "Writing narratives of slavery offered women like Drumgoold [and Burton], who had had little direct experience of bondage, the opportunity to celebrate their mothers as examples of genuine female heroism" (Andrews xxxi).

Kate Drumgoold's family comprised "seventeen girls" (SGS 8) and a son: "he was my mother's only boy" (8). The large family with eighteen children indicated the prevalence of boy preference among black slave families. Kate's mother was of the view that boys are more capable than girls in every aspect: "she [Kate's mother] often would say if we were all boys, she would not have to worry, for boys could do much better than girls" (13). Despite being enslaved, the family lived in their own house with Drumgoold's mother and father before the American Civil War. However, one day the house caught fire and turned into ashes, and the Drumgoold family became homeless: "I was two and a half years old, as near as I can remember, when my own slave mother's house was burned to the ground" (SGS 10). Her mother saved all the children from the fire alone, as her father was not at home.

After this incident, Kate Drumgoold's white mistress Mrs. Bettie House took the "two and half years old" (SGS 10) Kate Drumgoold to her house: "her heart so fixed that she could not leave me at my mother's any longer (6)". She provided her motherly affection and care: "she took me to be her dear, loving child, to eat, drink, sleep, and go wherever she went, if it was for months or even years; I had to be there as her own and not as a servant, for she did not like that, but I was there as her loving child for her to care for me, and everything that I wanted I had" (6). Kate Drumgoold developed an affectionate mother-daughter bond with Mrs. Bettie House. Kate Drumgoold gave her the role of mother in her life; she addressed her as "my

white mother” (SGS 6), so she had “two darling mothers” (16): one who gave birth to her but, owing to poverty, was forced to part with her in her early childhood, and the foster mother, who loved her and wanted to protect her from the complex realities of enslaved life. In this context, Jennifer Fleischner comments: “It is primarily around these two maternal centres that her narrative—and identity—revolve, while circulating throughout are the intertwining themes of memory, sickness, loss, recovery, slavery, gratitude, and whiteness” (399).

Mrs. Bettie House’s Evangelical faith, motherhood, and maternal love for young Kate compelled: “My white mother [did not like the idea] of calling us her slaves, and she always prayed to God that I should never know what slavery was, for she said I was never born to serve” (4). As a result, Kate Drumgoold remained unaware of the atrocities and violence experienced by the enslaved people during her stay with Mrs. Bettie House. In Kate’s narrative, there is no implicit or explicit reference to any cruelty perpetrated by her owner, Mrs. Bettie House. She spent a happy childhood in the company of a “white mother” (4), who provided her with the privilege of attending church, learning to ride a horse, and having access to valuable gifts:

I can call to mind when she the blessed one, that I call my white mother, went to get me some shoes and a fine hat, and the one that sold them told her, as she looked at a hat I wanted, that its price was twenty dollars . . . and he told my white mother that was too much for to spend on a hat for me, but she told him nothing would cost too much for her to get for me, and she got that fine hat for me and he had his money. (SGS 11-12)

In this context, Marie Schwartz, who has done extensive research on enslaved children, remarks that the owner, enslaved parents, and children shared a complex relationship: “At some times and in some places, owners succeeded in gaining the loyalty of slave children.” “Most were children raised from a young age in the big house by their owners with no close relationships with kin or other slaves—children dependent on close attachments to the white family for their survival” (104). Similarly, Kate Drumgoold enjoyed a warm bond with Mrs. Bettie House.

Kate Drumgoold’s selfless and pure love for her white mother and her sudden demise affected her emotionally: “The Lord has called her away from her child to be with Him, and how could I live

without her [her white mother]?" (SGS 11). She tried to counterbalance the loss of separation from her white mother by idealising the power of her white mother to fulfil her desires. She looked upon herself as Mrs. Bettie's "own dear, loving child" (6), as the happy memories of the time spent with her white mother became her strength for the rest of her life, and she regularly prayed to God to "help my feeble life be formed like hers [Mrs. Bettie House's]" (14).

Even her siblings' childhood was spent as household slaves, which deprived them of the love and nurturance of their mother as the institution of slavery in the American South promoted the separation of black slave children from their parents for monetary gains: "Mothers and fathers were brutally separated; children, when they became of age, were branded and frequently severed from their mothers" (Davis 2). Partly due to the tragic burning of Drumgoold's house and also because of the selling of her mother, the children were forced to do hard labour in slaveholders' households.

It was a common practice among white aristocratic slaveholding societies of the American South to send an enslaved Black person or poor man in place of a wealthy man as security in the Confederate Army as a soldier to fight in the American Civil War. Mr. House, Kate Drumgoold's owner, needed money "to keep the rich man from going to the field of battle" (4). Therefore, Kate's mother, Mrs. Drumgoold, became his victim when she "...was sold at the beginning of the war, [taken away] from all of her little ones, after the death of the lady that she belonged to" (SGS 4). The American Civil War was fought between American North and American South from 1861 to 1865. The Northern states of America supported the abolition of slavery, whereas the Confederate States of America, a collection of eleven southern states, opposed the abolition of slavery in America. The money collected was used to send a poor man into the American Civil War in place of Mr. House. Kate Drumgoold's brother James also met the same fate and was sent to the war: "The gentleman that my dear brother belonged to was a Methodist and a minister." "He did not want to go to war, so he sent my poor brother to defend what belonged to him" (29). The internal slave trade of African-Americans increased during the American Civil War to settle the financial obligations faced by white enslavers due to financial losses incurred in the war.

The separation of Kate Drumgoold from her mother (and also the death of her white mother) impacted her psyche: “the saddest thought to me was to know which way she [her black mother] had gone, and I used to go outside and look up to see if there was anything that would direct me, and I saw a clear place in the sky, and it seemed to me the way she had gone, and I watched it for three and a half years” (*SGS* 5). She tried to fill the gap of pain, loss, and separation from her mother by searching for her mother in the sky. In this context, Heather Andrea Williams remarks, “In a sky as vast as her grief, the child fixed her mind on a clear place to help her grapple with the dislocation brought on by her mother’s abrupt disappearance” (24). In this way, young Kate designed “her own mourning ritual, a practise infused with hope and a touch of magical thinking that allowed her to believe her mother was in the sky and would return just as suddenly as she had disappeared” (Williams *Help Me* 24). She spent her childhood surrounded by the memory of dual loss: loss due to separation from her mother and loss due to the death of the white mistress.

Kate Drumgoold, her siblings, and their mother formed a strong family unit after her mother returned to Virginia at the end of the American Civil War to reunite with her children with the help of information and resources provided by a white abolitionist, Major Bailey.

In the post-Civil War era, after the abolition of slavery in the United States, Kate Drumgoold and her elder sisters, after getting freedom from the legal bonds of slavery, started working as domestic helpers in different households to help their mother earn money in the absence of their father and brother, highlighting that Kate Drumgoold’s narrative is “an account of a female family unit working to support each other when the mother had finally gathered them all together after separation.” These female households were portrayed as complete families, even if they were not conventional in structure (Carby, 37). The Drumgoold family, supported by a single mother and nine daughters, worked in unison to manage the household:

. . .the typical slave family was matriarchal in form, for the mother’s role was far more important than the father’s. In so far as the family did have significance, it involved responsibilities which traditionally belonged to women, such as cleaning house, preparing food, making

clothes, and raising children. The husband was at most his wife's assistant, her companion and her sex partner. (Stampp qtd. in Davis 15)

After a reunion with her siblings, Kate Drumgoold's mother searched for their father. She found "he was married to another she tried to get him; but she could do nothing about it. . .he found him another wife" (8). His getting remarried underscores his lack of deep ties of love and affection with his children and wife, due to which he quickly gave up on his family. As such, the institution of slavery destroyed Kate Drumgoold's family by splitting them apart, illustrating "the mother-centered family with its emphasis on the primacy of the mother-child relation and only tenuous ties to a man" (Bracey et al., qtd. in Davis).

Kate Drumgoold's narrative highlights how she developed cordial relations with the individuals around her and how her solid evangelical faith in God "helped me to find love and favour with all after my white mother was gone from this earth when I felt that I would soon follow the darling one to the blessed mansion" (14). Traversing the path of evangelical womanhood, she built up a relationship of love, kindness, and motherly bond with most of her white employers: "It was there that I met Mrs. Sarah Potter." She has been all of a mother to me to give me all the encouragement she could bestow on me" (SGS 34). She referred to Mrs. C. L. Franklin as a mother: "Miss C. L. Franklin's mother, who is a lovely woman whom we all love as a mother, for she had many of the students at her house to board, like Mrs. William Lovett, and she was so very kind to all of them that she will be remembered by us all, for we love those in our school life that would say a kind word to us" (47). She "learned to love as a mother" (37) to Mrs. Haseltine, a lady from Boston. Her Evangelical faith, spirituality, and love for God helped her develop close motherly bonds with all her employers, despite the fact that she was a worker and these women were her employers.

Kate Drumgoold's amiable relationships with her white masters, mistresses, and employers seemed to develop and evolve simultaneously with the notion of love and humanity concerning Evangelical Christianity and womanhood. Patricia Hill Collins emphasises this idea of developing cordial relationships with whites:

[women] who are domestic workers or who work in proximity to Whites may experience a unique relationship with the dominant group. For example, African-American women domestics are exposed to all the intimate details of the lives of their White employers. Working for Whites offers domestic workers a view from the inside . . . In some cases domestic workers form close, long-lasting relationships with their employers. (185)

By developing motherly bonds with her white employers, Kate Drumgoold transcended the oppression resulting from slavery. Mrs. Bettie House's motherly treatment and love towards an enslaved Black person who was considered racially inferior by Southern slave holding aristocratic society negated and opposed the ideology of racial and class discrimination.

In childhood, Kate Drumgoold "was baptised by Rev. David Moore, the pastor of the Washington Avenue Church" (*SGS* 17) as "In a culture that placed black females at the bottom of a hierarchy of human value, conversion gave black women a sense of self-esteem, personal worth, and dignity rooted in God's validation of their humanity" (Lindley 180). In evangelical Christianity, she found a means to face the injustice and oppression that many African-Americans encountered based on race, class, and gender: "I look to Jesus." "I have given my life, and He can hold me in the power of His might and keep me from failing" (17). Her faith in Jesus Christ gave her the strength to resist the injustice bestowed on enslaved people.

Being a devoted Evangelical woman, Kate Drumgoold used education to serve and uplift newly emancipated African-Americans from oppression, discrimination, racial degradation, and educational deprivation. For evangelical women, education led to self-awareness and self-realisation to achieve spiritual salvation and social activism. She became an educator and a distinct literary voice in her community to bring about social change. Her determination to educate herself and the African-Americans became her life's objective: "For every time that I saw the newspaper there was some one of our race in the far South getting killed for trying to teach (*SGS* 20-21)," She decided, "I made up my mind that I would die to see my people taught. . . "I could not rest till my people were educated" (21), as she realised education was a panacea for the agonised African-Americans.

After the abolition of slavery in America, the black slaves were free but confronted with new challenges and struggles: “the source of oppression was deeper than the racial discrimination that produced unemployment, shoddy housing, inadequate education, and substandard medical care” (Davis). The newly emancipated African-Americans were left with no choice but to work on plantations as labourers or as domestic servants in white households. However, the realisation that they could combat hunger, poverty, and healthcare through education became their prime objective:

Even as they risked everything to reach freedom, African American’s once secret acquisition of literacy emerged as both as public demand and support for education. Their determination to acquire literacy and numeracy generated the energy to build schoolhouses even when they talked the physical challenges of hunger, disease and homelessness. (Williams *Self-Taught* 30)

Kate Drumgoold was aware of the value of literacy for African-Americans. Her desire to educate herself and then to educate African-Americans is seen in her effort to secure schooling for herself despite poverty. Working as a domestic help in different white households, Kate Drumgoold continued to save money to receive formal education and schooling: “I should save every cent that I could so that I might send myself to school someday” (SGS 23). In Washington, D.C., Kate Drumgoold’s schooling began at “Wayland Seminary, under the leadership of Professor G. M. P. King, of Bangor, Maine” (23). After attending Wayland Seminary school “for three years” (23), she moved to Brooklyn in 1878. She had to resume her job as a domestic servant due to financial constraints, but the determination to acquire an education made her “earn money to go off to school” (24).

Kate Drumgoold was “reform-minded” (Sweet 63); she strongly desired to uplift and bring social reform to African-Americans. In 1886, Kate Drumgoold completed her education and became a school teacher: “all of the people sought me to take their children in my school and give them a start. “I had my hands full of work, but I let them come in because the Board always sent them to me to find out if I could find room and time, and I always made the time” (SGS 25). She continued to teach deprived African-Americans for eleven years to “refine and elevate the mind” (27), in order to “cultivate our hearts

and minds and live to bless those we meet” (27). Her optimism and strong faith in God helped her continue to teach African-Americans. Besides, black students have a strong desire to acquire knowledge: “When I had finished my public school, I taught a private school for the summer and had a large number of scholars, and they progressed well.” Some of them would go without their food all day to study extra lessons (52–53), which gave her strength despite different constraints.

Kate Drumgoold, in her narrative, presents an authentic and fresh perspective on black slave girls’ maternal relationship with white mistresses and black mothers and its impact on her mind. Kate Drumgoold, through her narrative, highlights the collective struggle of the slave community before and after emancipation in the American South. It depicts the struggle of African-Americans who found solace in evangelical Christianity and emerged victors. She not only represented the plight, conflicts, and power struggles of black slave women in racist and classist American society but also acted as an agency that resisted the brutal slave system by exercising autonomy and following the path of love, faith, and spirituality: “No sooner had the heads of a favoured few been filled with knowledge than their hearts yearned to dispense blessings to the less fortunate of their race. “With tireless energy and eager zeal, women of colour have worked in every conceivable way to elevate their race” (Terrell 65). She demanded change and equality for the black slave community.

Kate Drumgoold’s traumatic experiences of slavery and separation from her family in her early childhood made her turn to God for love, warmth, and comfort. She expressed her gratitude towards God for the significant accomplishments in her life: “If there is one that should feel grateful, it is this feeble-bodied slave girl, for I was such a slave to sickness, and God was so good to raise me, even me, and I will say, praise His name” (14). She tried to connect every good deed to the mercy of God and always placed faith in God during her difficult times and sickness: “The Lord helped me to find love and favour with all after my white mother was gone from this earth” (14). Her description of her religious and secular life, an account of her relationship with her white and black mother and with white employers, and her spiritual development and quest for

education made her testimonial voice distinct and unique: “We, as the Negro Race, are a free people, and God be praised for it. “We, as the Negro Race, need to feel proud of the race, and I for one do so with my heart, soul, and mind, knowing as I do, for I have laboured for the good of the race, that their children might be the bright and shining lights” (SGS 3).

Kate Drumgoold, in Evangelicalism, found a means to transform her memory of childhood separation into love for humanity and God. She tried to make her life valuable by associating herself with African-Americans’ collective welfare. She imbibed the ideals and values of evangelicalism to create educational and social opportunities for African-Americans. Within complex series of constraints of male authority, white patriarchy, racism, and class difference, Kate Drumgoold being a black Evangelical woman, took hold of her life and shaped goals and activities based on her conception of womanhood as “. . . religious behavior became a more important means of self-expression for them [women] than it was for men” (Boylan 76). Evangelicalism helped her move from self-growth to community growth, treading on the path of education for spiritual comfort and self-realisation.

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