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Literacy and Freedom in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Yashoda Chaulagain

Lecturer in English

Siddhartha Vanasthali Science Campus

Email: yashuchaulagain@gmail.com

Abstract

Autobiography of Frederick Douglass "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave" deals with the importance of literacy in slaves' life to motivate them to articulate the injustice of slavery to themselves and others, and helps them to recognize themselves as human beings rather than slaves. Frederick Douglass, a former slave, presents his self-education as the primary means by which he could be able to free himself, and it becomes his greatest tool to work for the freedom of all slaves. During the slavery time, slave owners kept men and women as slaves by depriving them of knowledge and education. However, Douglass encourages the slaves to be literate in order to pursue freedom. Literacy encourages Douglass to resist the brutality and suppression of slavery. It gives power to him to escape from the plantation and leads him freedom. His ability to read is highly influential, when he moves away from the home of Auld. Douglass makes an effort to educate other slaves to read The New Testament at a weekly Sunday School. After getting basic literacy, Frederick Douglass begins to reach out to others, assisting his fellow slaves to read and operating a forbidden school. When he gets more knowledge of the world, he could no longer passively submit to a life of slavery. Later on, he escapes from the slavery and becomes a world famous abolitionist, author, and orator, he has published his narrative detailing his time as a slave.

Keywords: freedom, injustice, language, Literacy, rights, slavery, superiority

Introduction

In Douglass's narrative, literacy plays a key role to change his life from slavery to freedom. For him, attaining literacy is an important stage, in the process of his transformation from silence to speech. He believes that literacy can help grow the verbal skills and give consciousness and confidence to use those skills in practice, such as logical reasoning against brutality of white masters. By breaking conventional expectations, Douglass does focus on his escape from slavery. Instead of emphasizing a geographical transformation in an exciting and expected description of movement from south to north, Douglass stresses that literacy is essential to change the notion of slavery in the south. Therefore, his acquisition of literacy ignites his dissatisfaction with slavery and gives him a position of leadership in a group of slaves with whom he plans to escape, which can be seen in his narrative, he says, "I have the happiness to know, that . . . one, at least, is now free through my agency" (99). Douglass emphasizes that it is a literacy, which makes him aware about a slave's position and he motivates other slaves to be free from slavery.

Douglass is innocent and ignorant small boy who does not know the value of the literacy till he reaches Baltimore with Hugh Auld. When he reaches there he begins to learn to read and write. He knows the power of language to be intelligent which helps him resist the brutality of slavery. His educational journey paves the way to freedom. He finds that white people are in the position of language to threaten the ignorant slave. He is convinced that literacy provides an important key to achieve his freedom and secretly begins learning to read on his own. In the beginning of the story, Douglass, seems innocent, silent, only onlooker of whipping and murder of the other slaves in Mr. Anthony's plantation. He witnesses the crying and suffering of the slave. Then, by looking at other slave's suffocated life he realizes his position of slave for the first time. At that time, the slave owners restrain slaves' fundamental rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness depriving them of knowledge and education, slaves must seek knowledge in order to pursue freedom. To be free from any bondage literacy is essential tool because if someone can read and write then can resist logically. He becomes conscious about his rights during the days in Baltimore.

Textual Analysis

The young Douglass is taught to read by his mistress Sophia Auld, but he is interrupted by his master, Hugh Auld who warns his wife, "It is unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read . . . if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now, [. . .] it would forever unfit him to be a slave" (77). Mr. Auld here forbids his wife to teach Douglass how to read and write because he believes that education ruins slaves' life. He has a phobia that if slaves become literate, they may begin to raise questions against slavery and the system may be in danger. Douglass knows why Mr. Auld denies access to literacy provide him with a profound insight as to literacy's power in the eyes of his slave master. In this view, Pettinger Tejvan in "Biography of Frederick Douglass" narrates, "The attitude of his slave master, in trying to prevent him from reading, was also a cautionary lesson for Douglass and throughout his life, he emphasized the importance of education to help ameliorate the conditions of African American" (2). Douglass becomes more confident and determined to get education when he is forbidden by his master to read. He plans to be literate and make others conscious about slavery system.

Moreover, Douglass claims that his intellectual journey has started not to stop as it is his great opportunity to learn to read and write. He ignores physical punishment and focuses on spiritual and intellectual freedom. Now he realizes his power of thinking and speech. In this manner, Lisa Yun Lee opines, "The connection between the power of thinking and speech is realized as Douglass the silent marginalized man transitions to active individual when a white mistress cracks an opening in the white discourse. She offers to teach him to read, and Douglass seizes the opportunity to enter the power structure" (57) Lee displays that Douglass realizes the connection between the power of thinking and speech after learning to read and write by white mistress. When she offers him to learn to read, he thinks literacy is important to be powerful as white man. Douglass says in the story, "My youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. [. . .] I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (78).

According to Douglass, literacy is the key to domination others. He struggles to know why white people dehumanize the slaves. Now he comes to know that white people are educated, therefore they can articulate the things. Moreover, literacy and language are the sources of power to dominate slaves. Then he understands 'literacy is the pathway from slavery to freedom.' His understanding about the power of literacy leads him to gain freedom in part by virtue of his self-education; he does not have illusions that knowledge automatically renders slave's free. To make clear the very sense, Yun Lee explores, "The use of language as a power tool in slave society marginalizes and enslaves people who are outside of or prevented from learning the dominant language"(51). Her rhetoric shows language is most powerful tool to dominate others so white people create obstacle to the slaves to learn it. However, he is determined to learn to read and write without others help. Douglass says, "Conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose at whatever cost of trouble to learn how to read" (78). His assertion of narrative gives us the knowledge that in the time of slavery master would restrict the slaves going outside and learning something. Slaves had to do work being in chain in the master's farm. By knowing the fact he is determined that he can tolerate the punishment but cannot discontinue learning to read. As a character of narrative Douglass valorizes the education to be conscious about one's own rights of living.

His determination about education leads him towards progressive mode. He begins to read Newspaper and junior Auld's book. Slaves are restricted to be educated rather they are enforced to be ignorant and loyal to the master. Douglass further narrates, "Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper" (79). It shows that when she sees Douglass reading newspaper, she becomes angry because her husband has taught her not to give the chance to him to read anything. It is supposed to be the constitution of slavery corrupts the innocence people like, Mrs. Auld that her angelic face changes into demon. In the counter of Mrs. Auld, his strong desire of learning to read and write denotes that he wants to be a human being, unfit for slavery by learning reading. To clear the point, Lisa Sisco explores, "In this pre-literate stage, Douglass accepts an ideology of literacy put forth by Auld, one which rests upon binary oppositions of . . . Auld uses literacy as a means to assert superiority over his slave" (2). Her assertions show that Douglass knows the power of knowledge to overcome from the slavery. Now, Douglass becomes conscious about the law of southern states, which never allows learn to read and write to the slave in America. Because of the restricted or biased law slave people cannot get opportunity to study. Therefore, Douglass by learning to read wants to make himself free and helps others to move towards freedom.

Douglass becomes aware about injustice and slavery after reading the book entitled *Columbian Orator*, where he reads dialogue between master and escaped slave. This dialogue then helps to articulate why slavery is wrong, both philosophically and politically. He further narrates, "The moral, which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder [. . .] a bold denunciation of slavery and a powerful vindication of human rights" (80). The dialogue, which reinforces Douglass to go against the brutality of white people because he knows there, is law of human rights written about the equal treatment between white and black. But slaves are not given equal rights to white so now he becomes confident to articulate these things being active speaker. Patricia J. Ferreira, indicates, "Douglass could not

resist the chance to expose such evidence to the world. The dialogue format allowed him to assert his own humanity; it served to heighten the fact that the very premise upon which slavery was based – the dehumanization of the slave- was faulty” (14). Now after reading the dialogue he knows the differences between human and inhuman behavior of white master. Moreover, he knows why blacks are dehumanized. He believes the dehumanization of the slave is faulty as he develops the confident to prove he is also human beings as white.

Douglass shows his consciousness about rights by ignoring the order of a ‘pious and slave breaker’ Mr. Covey. He does not respond to Mr. Covey’s questions. For the first time, Douglass uses his rights of not speaking. He says, “I made him no answer, but stood with my clothes on [. . .] I still made him no answer, nor did I more to stripe myself” (89). His resistance via silence along with literacy is helpful in getting freedom. His narrative shows he wants to break the tradition of slave and master that slave should be benevolent, faithful, and ignorant rather he wants to be bold as a white. Furthermore, Patricia opines, “Douglass often expressed his belief that he had a right to have a say in decisions that directly related to and reflected upon his life” (13/14). Patricia indicates that Douglass finds America is the country where white people have rigid sense about the slave. They never give freedom to them as in Ireland, where slaves are treated as human beings. Now, by not giving answer to the cruel master, he respects his rights of decision of not speaking.

In the same manner, Douglass wonders here and there to know the rights of decision making of his own life when he was enslaved in the plantation. Unfortunately he cannot use the basic human rights such as life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness during the slavery period. But after being educated by himself he does not give answer to Covey, a white brutal, slave breaker. He even fights with Covey as reply of his inhuman slaps to Douglass, which is a symbol of resistance. He further says in his narrative, “I resolved to fight, and suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and I did so, I rose. [. . .] my resistance was entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf” (94). Here, Douglass shows the immorality and brutality as white man used to show in slavery period. As being white master Covey has thought that Douglass does not attack him but unexpectedly he does. His behavior surprises Mr. Covey so he calls Mr. Hughes and Bill for help as his protection. Now black boys are saving him from the slaps of Douglass who have been suppressed for a long time by him.

Frederick’s self-narrative not only asserts the power of literacy in terms of articulation, and development of confident writing is also key to reveal the suffering of black slave in America. He learns to write outside the Auld household in Baltimore. He is motivated in writing by looking the written letters in Durgin and Bailey’s ship- yard. First of all he copies the letter written in ship. Then he seizes the opportunities to transform the shipyard into a scene of self-education and acts of resistance. He shows superiority of literacy over white persons because he feels that it is white who takes him a slave and ignorant. What Steven Mailloux says, “Color marks the superiority of the master, the inferiority of the slave” (49). Indeed, he uses trick to makes himself superior to white by applying literacy into a competition designed to feed the white man. Douglass writes in narrative that how he learns to write, “I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas’s copy- book, copying what he had written. I convinced . . . I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus . . . I finally

succeeded in learning how to write” (82). His great aptitudes of learning to write is completed by copying white boy’s hand writing. Now he can express his experiences and suffering through writing. By relating writing Sisco explores, “Douglass’s acquisition of literacy is a series of acts of resistance . . . he shouldn’t be taught to read or write. But . . . he is also copying his young master’s hand imitating his style. . . . handwriting, the unique mark of literacy, always bears the trace of his unwitting teachers and enslavers” (8). Sisco’s view about importance of literacy indicates the resistance through copying the hand writing of white. As he has not been allowed to read and write by the legal code and master. But, as opposition of order he copies the Handwriting to make it a means of escaping from the slavery. If slaves cannot write, their side of slave story cannot be told therefore, they should learn to write.

Douglass’s courage and determination get meaning when he starts to teach at St. Michael’s plantation to the fellow slaves in the Sabbath school. Douglass has understood the importance of literacy that “the key to literacy is the reading development, a progression of skills which begins with the ability to understand spoken words and decode written words” (UNESCO, 149). His life changes one silence slave to a bold confident leader, teacher who helps to literate other fellow slaves. He opines in his narrative, “I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty nine – lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been started by their cruel masters . . . cruel masters, they had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them” (99). Thus the fellow slaves are brutally beaten by their masters, and if the masters know about their education, they would torture the slaves. In this miserable condition, they have a great desire of learning to read and write. Douglass gets imitated with the fellow slave while teaching in school. He feels that, this is the time of meeting together, unifying together so, he says, “we were linked and internalized with each other. . . . I never loved any or – slaves” (99). It denotes Douglass individual desire of getting education becomes constitutional; most of the slaves are supporting him as a master/ teacher. By learning to read the fellow slaves also become conscious about racism and slowly begin to think literacy is power of resistance. Reading gives a type of knowledge and confident to the reader, so, fellow slaves also want to get knowledge and power that can resist the injustice of their own body. Elizabeth McHenry explains, “Reading was a collective exercise, a means of developing the critical skills which to interrogate systems of knowledge and move people to consciousness of their own power” (5). According to her, reading makes people powerful, reasonable and logical. They become conscious after reading a book; they gain different knowledge and pleasure in reading. Douglass and fellow slaves also follow the same strategy to overcome from the barbaric slavery.

Douglass as being self-educated person is a conscious about the justice. Therefore he wants to escape from the injustice and hellish world of slavery. In the search of identity and freedom he reaches in Gardner’s cackling factory. There, Douglass becomes the protector of the poor white employer. He does not want to be sufferer of other rather if he escapes from the slavery, he himself is responsible. He says, “I will now proceed to the statement of those facts, connected with my escape, for which I am alone responsible, and for which no one can be made to suffer but myself” (108). Douglass continues to think about to escape from the slavery though the master Thomas said him not to deceive him as earlier. If the slave wants to be happy, he/she should be obedient and faithful to master. In contrast to this things Douglass says: “I continued

to think, and to think about the injustice of my enslavement, and the means of escape" (108). He is not going to stop to think about injustice and enslavement rather he wants to run away and settled his life being free from bondage of slavery. So, he is searching the ways of getting justice to slaves as white people in the plantation. In this point he thinks literacy along with money is the means of freedom. Douglass has got knowledge that only literary can not work properly to get freedom but economy also plays vital role. But, he becomes economically independent by literacy. Now he starts earning money in order to be self- dependent and escape from the plantation. He decides to make money, "It was a step towards freedom to be allowed to bear the responsibilities of a Freeman and I was determined to hold on upon it. I bent myself to the work of making money" (109). He knows how to run away from the plantation for his freedom. So, he is determined to collect money in order to get rid of slavery. By using trick, he is intimated with white man then learns cackling very soon. After that he wages more than before, which helps him escape from the plantation.

Similarly, Douglass's determination of getting education in plantation finally leads him to be free from enslavement in the south. He reaches New York by escaping from the plantation by using knowledge and consciousness which he has got from self education. In New York he can breathe freely without any restriction. Hence, he remembers his past life of naming. In every plantation, his subjectivity is imprecised by white man. Douglass's subjectivity has been redefined by naming. His innocence subjectivity makes him weak who could not do any things outside. The name, such as 'Stanley,' 'Frederick Bailey,' is the most problematic to assert the black identity. Finally, Bailey renames himself 'Frederick Douglass.' He becomes free when he escapes from plantation to New York. He owns his own house, established business with Mr. Johnson in Talbot country Maryland. Lisa Sisco further explains, "Douglass's conflict here emerges out of his identity as a literate being, which had always been connected to his ability to write . . . the masters, and out of a sense of personal responsibility as survivors of slavery" (24). Sisco's view shows Douglass's journey ends with being a great slave narrator of his own life. In his narrative, he talks about racism, dehumanization and essence of the black people in slavery time. His writing reveals the discourse of master and survivors of slavery.

Douglass celebrates freedom when he reaches in New York and involved in abolitionist movement. He says, "I was my own master, it was a happy moment. [. . .] The reward of which was to be entirely my own. There was no master Hugh standing" (114). His assertion of self-identity here shows that he is free for the first time, he is rewarded and all things are his own; there is no master to restrict him as Hugh Auld who used to restrict before. Indeed, he experiences the pleasure and joy of freedom, which he never had experienced before. Now, he is enjoying new conjugal life. He narrates, "It was to me the starting point of a new experience" (114). By presenting his self – suffering thorny language, Douglass is showing the detailed the inspiration to, and rewards of his success. Here Douglass uses the power of language to conceive his reality. Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass is a detailed, the process of self-discovery by which Douglass recognized the evils of slavery as an institution, his narrative involves the association of literacy with freedom.

Conclusion

In this way, Douglass achieves his freedom by using several techniques and tricks. However, literacy is one of the important things that help him forming his own identity thereby challenging the whites. His escape from brutality to freedom, south to north, his flight to New York are helpful for him in developing his sense of self and freedom. His freedom is the possible freedom for all blacks. At last he understands he has no masters and mistresses. He realizes he himself is the master of his own life. His desire to make his world a more justice place led him to fight for the abolition of slavery and to support social justice and civil rights for African Americans and Women. Being America's most famous former slave Frederick Douglass influences the people to overcome from the place which is not suitable and should raise voice against the injustice.

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