

## Early Black Autobiography: The Suffering of Individual and Community: Frederick Douglass autobiography



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### Abstract

Autobiography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards became a tool in the hands of the sufferers and an instrument for resistance and revolution. The voiceless and subalterns received a voice through the genre to express their agonies; pains and it emerged as a platform to openly blame the establishments. Slavery the darkest reality of Afro American political, social and economic discourse came into picture with the spread of Autobiographies. Life and Times of Frederick Douglass- Frederick Douglass is the milestone autobiography of world literature in general and black Afro Americans in particular. Frederick Douglass who lived as a slave and later served honourably as the United State Marshall in the Columbia District put his memories in his autobiography published in 1881. He could give details about his life as a slave and his escape from slavery in the third volume of his autobiography which he could not do in first two volumes under the fear to his life from his masters. The autobiography is a vivid picture of a horrible account of slavery and its dark history during the time of slavery. The autobiography is filled with unbelievable and tragically intensified experiences of Douglass as a slave. The research paper focus on the struggle the writer went through as an individual and a part of a vast community whose destiny was tied with the slavery, it is an effort to analyse the conditions of the slaves and how the autobiography became inspiration to all hopeless and powerless slaves to overcome fear, trauma and resist with the evil of slavery.

**Key words:** - slavery, autobiography, slave narrative, black afro Americans, slavery, abolitionist, Fredrick Douglass

### The background of Autobiography

Afro American autobiography also began as a slave narrative formed its tradition and flow and identity. The credit of first Slave narratives is given to the autobiographical work published in 1760 *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon* that. 1

After this a few interesting autobiographies emerged on the horizon, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) is a two-volume autobiography written by Olaudah Equiano, an African man who was enslaved and later made his fortune as an abolitionist in Britain. *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United State of America*, by Venture Smith in (1798) Firstly published in 1772 and added at least twelve editions by the end of the century, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert "Ukawsaw Gronniosaw", an African Prince*, by Ukawsaw Gronniosaw.

*The Blind African Slave, Or Memoirs of Bordereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace*, by Jeffrey Brace

published in 1810, narrates a story of a slave who survives horrors of slavery and settles as a farm owner in last phase of his life. *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher* by John Jea in 1811, the title itself summarises the tragedy a life of a slave goes through. James Matlack claims in his commentary on *The Autobiography of Fredrick Douglass* that Douglass autobiography is constantly cited as one of the best autobiographies among the scores of such accounts produced by or in the names of ex slaves during 1840 to 1850. 2

John Savoca praises Douglass narrative as one of the most important books published in America, Fredrick Douglass received much attention. The reasons Savoca adds as attention has been increasing for a generation at a rate parallel to the growth of interest in the autobiography as a genre. 3

1. Mbui, J. K. (2021). Brief Survey of the African American Autobiography; Tradition, Development, and Images of Africa. *The University Journal*, 3(1), 59-68.

2. Matlack James,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/274419>

3. Sekora John, *Comprehending Slavery: Language and Personal History In Douglass' "Narrative" Of 1845*, CLA Journal Vol. 29, No. 2, (DECEMBER 1985)pp. 157-170 (14 pages) Published By: College Language Association

### The positing of the narrator as slave.

All the autobiographies of blacks and particularly slaves, carries a sombre, depressing and melancholic tone, it is obvious and natural to express the agonies, pains and tragedies they had encountered as a slave. The identity of the narrator as a slave becomes the vial point in the autobiographical writings. The positioning of the slave as an individual and social member, is very important in slave narratives because the slave writes for himself yet he or she voice out the agonies of entire community. The struggle doesn't remain a personal story, it encompasses the journey of millions as the auto biographer of second generation and abolitionist Richard Wright claims that

"Sense of theme will emerge in Negro writing when Negro writers try to fix this story about some pole of meaning, remembering as they do so that in the creative process meaning proceeds *equally* as much from the contemplation of the subject matter as from the hopes and apprehensions that rage in the heart of the writer." (Wright, 342-343) 4

Douglass categorically clears his positioning in the initial pages of his narrative as he puts it, "I aim only to give the reader a truthful impression of my slave-life, without unnecessarily affecting him with harrowing details." (Douglass p- 17). The system of slavery existed and supported by the government, Christianity (as most of the beneficiaries were clergies and churchmen) law and rules of welfare state, Douglass defines slavery that no academician would have dared to define, according to him,

"Slavery, like all other great systems of wrong, founded in the depths of human selfishness, and existing for ages, has not neglected its own conservation. It has steadily exerted an influence upon all around it favourable to its own continuance. And to-day it is so strong that it could exist, not only without law, but even against law. (Douglass 17) 5

### Childhood Memories

Douglass starts the narration chronologically from his childhood memories that goes with the traditional method of writing an autobiography completely based on the memory of the narrator.

4. Bloom 's edited, *Richard Wright, Introduction: Blueprint for Negro Writing*|| in Addison Gayle, Jr. ed., *The Black Aesthetic* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1971), p. 342-343.

5. Douglass p-17

He opens the account of narration with the illustrations of his childhood memories. Like most of

the memoirs the story opens with his birth in Talbot Country of European shore in the state of Maryland. His birthplace was thinly populated and looked like a desert without any spirit or happiness of life.

The inhabitant mostly black are seen in complete dullness and frustrations. The spirit of living is gone missing, and life seemed a heavy burden over them. The perspective of narrator dominates in the sombre description of the conditions that surrounded to his childhood. One of the common phenomena found in slave autobiographies is the missing of birth date. Symbolically it reiterates the fact that time and space is a vacuum in which a slave is born and destined to live a life like an animal. The birthdates are marked with the seasons that connotes the life without any past, present and future as well. Douglass later calculated his birthdate on his own logic with the seasons and according to him he was born in February 1871 on the chronological sequencing of the events, suggesting higher cognitive abilities, seldom expected from a slave. Ignorant about his parents, like most of the slaves, and a custom of slavery, Douglass was looked after by his grandparents Betsy and Isaac as his mother was separated from him because it was a slave custom. He lamented the lost love of his mother,

"The practice of separating mothers from their children and hiring them out at distances too great to admit of their meeting, save at long intervals, was a marked feature of the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system." (Douglass p-10) 6

### Family separation

The most tragic experience of slave life was the devastation of family and blood relationships and the animal like treatment given to the slave family members. The parents and the small children were subject to trauma, separation and tragedy as the children were not allowed to stay with their parents and sometime children were sold to others for the want of money. The relationship of slaves, their emotions, feelings didn't matter at all for their masters. It was heinous and barbarous behaviour by the planters who were whites. Douglass explains how his mother used to visit him for very short time at night as he was kept away from him at different farmhouse.

6. Douglass p-10

He didn't have any memory of father; he very emotionally writes, "Of my father I know nothing. Slavery had no recognition of fathers, as none of families." (Douglass p-11) This is how the slave's kids were brought up. Sometime the children were sent to work on plantation at farm and were exploited throughout a sunny and hot day without any food or water. In a heart touching incident, he narrates his meeting with his blood brother and sister accidentally. When Douglass was taken on another farm of Colonel Lloyd's plantation from Tuckahoe with his

grandmother, he came across the fact that he has his own brothers and sisters. he pitifully says, "Brothers and sisters we were by blood, but slavery had made us strangers" (Douglass p-13) These situations were very common part of their sufferings. He was informed about his mother's death at Lloyd's farm and the place of mother was wiped out from his life. Douglass entered Lloyd's plantation when he was less than seven years old, and he says: "This was my first introduction to the realities of slave system" (Douglass p-14).

### Beatings and murders

Douglass gradually began to become aware of the cruelties of slavery and he writes: "One of the first circumstances that opened my eyes to the cruelties and wickedness of slavery and its hardening influences upon my old master, was his refusal to interpose his authority to protect and shield a young woman, a cousin of mine, who had been most cruelly abused and beaten by his overseer in Tuckahoe." (Douglass 22) Such kinds of abusing and beatings were common for the slaves and for every simple mistake they received punishment as gifts from their masters. Douglass witnessed many such beating and initially he was shocked. All these incidents make him to go into detail and inquire about the origin and nature of slavery. He even asks: "Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves and other masters?" (Douglass p- 25)

7. Douglass p-14

8. Douglass p- 25

Concerning this Douglass says, "...killing a slave, or any coloured person, in Talbot Co., Maryland, was not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community" (Douglass 35) 09 St. Michael's ship carpenter Mr. Thomas Lanman killed two slaves while Austin Gore who succeeded Mr. Hopkins as overseer on Colonel Lloyd's plantation murdered Bill Denby, who was a young, coloured man. Mrs Giles Hicks kills a young black girl for not getting up from sleep when the baby she was assigned to attend woke up and started crying resulting the break of the sleep of the mother. The deep sleep proved a fatal blunder for the girl, and she was brutally murdered by the master. This incident is not isolated but throughout the memoir death echoes the fate of being a slave.

### Master – Slave relationship

The memoirs of black autobiographies are filled with the main villain of their suffering, apart from the system, is the cruel, heartless and punisher, the master. The picture of master cannot be imagined without a whip in his hand and sadistic pleasure or ruthless wrath on his face. The Douglass memoir is no exception. According to the records of Douglass, the slave master's sole intention was to get as much work as they could from slaves, but giving proper facilities and protection for their slaves was of least

concern for the masters. Even in the cold season, the slaves were left to shiver and though they were not in good health the masters were not ready to make any compromise in terms of work. In relation to slaves, "condition in plantations", Douglass says: "The pigs in the pen had leaves, and the horses in the stable had straw, but the children had no beds" (Douglass p-38). 10 The movements of slaves from one plantation to another was common and it symbolises the rootlessness of the community. The bonds with the people, soil and situation were never static and stable. Douglass narrates his shifting to Baltimore to stay with Thomas Auld's brother Hugh Auld to take care of his child. When Douglass was sent to Baltimore, he was just nine years old and though he himself was a child he was given the duty of looking after another child. It was in the house of Mr. Auld with the assistance of Mrs. Auld that Douglass entered the new world of education though it was prohibited for slaves by White masters.

9. Douglass p- 35

10. Douglass p- 38

### Deprivation of Education

"Any discussion of Afro-American writers can rightfully begin with the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country we have been categorically denied not only literacy, but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life." States Barbara Smith in her essay *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*." (Smith, 1977)

Since the time slavery had begun, the slaves were not encouraged to get an education. Education was the only mean and tool to uplift the slaves from their pathetic condition and hence it was denied by the white masters. Douglass compares the slave holders as robbers and puts a philosophical truth when he justifies the role of Masters as he says,

"Slave holders are only a band of successful robbers, who, leaving their own homes, went into Africa for the purpose of stealing and reducing my people to slavery" (Douglass p-46). The first and foremost thing that the whites robbed from slaves was their right to education because they thought that if slaves acquired knowledge, they would emerge as a threat to their supreme position. Amid cruel slavery, Douglass emerged successful in getting an opportunity to learn reading and writing through Mrs. Auld who was "not only kind-hearted, but remarkably pious;" (Douglass 41). The gratefulness is the quality he fulfilled his duty towards his white master. While staying with Auld's family Douglass heard his mistress reading the Bible and became curious of this reading and immediately the desire to learn this mystery roused in his mind. Within no time he expressed his desire to learn in front of his mistress and to his great wonder she agreed to teach him which shows her kindness and very soon she started teaching him alphabets. But unfortunately,

Mr. Auld came to know about this and scolded his wife by calling teaching slaves as unlawful and said: "If you give nigger an inch he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible, it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy. If you teach him how to read, he'll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself." (Douglass p-42)

11. Smith Barbara, *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* (1997) in Hazel Arnett Ervin, ed., *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999) p.163.

12. Douglass p-46, p-42

The Blacks were physically well-built and if they became mentally strong by gaining knowledge, then the position of the Whites would be threatened. Therefore, the Whites kept the Blacks in ignorance by not educating them properly because as Douglass says, "Knowledge unfits a child to be a slave" (Douglass p-43). 13 The abolitionist of first phase realised the value of education. The key for their freedom is education, the difference between whites and the blacks is the education and its significance.

### Experiences of brutality at St. Michael's Plantation

After staying for seven long years with Mr. Auld's family Douglass was sent to St. Michaels in 1833. Here he was placed under Mr. Covey who had the reputation of breaking the slaves. He was known for his cruelty and barbarity. Douglass's actual work of slavery started under his master Covey who ordered him to bring wood from the forest, the distance of which was two miles from the forest to the house.

His stay with Mr. Covey was in fact the horrible days which he could not forget throughout his life. Regarding the cruelty of slavery during his stay with Mr. Covey Douglass writes:

"I remained with Mr. Covey one year (I cannot say I lived with him), and during the first six months I was there I was whipped, either with sticks or cowskins, every week. Aching bones and a sore back were my constant companions.... From the dawn of day in the morning till the darkness was complete in the evening I was kept at hard work in the field or the woods." (Douglass p-67) 14

The bitterness of slavery is witnessed through the chapter as Douglass writes about his six months stay with Mr. Covey as: "I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery that time was during the first six months of my stay with this man Covey.... Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me-in body, soul and spirit" (Douglass p- 69).15 The descriptions of the tortures and brutality can shake any sensitive human

expressed by Douglass. The masters change but the poisonous fruit of slavery continues.

13. Douglass p-43

14. Douglass p-67

15. Douglass p-69

Moreover, Douglass says: "...humanity fell before the systematic tyranny of slavery" (Douglass p-73), and the slave masters were far away of any humanity, feelings or emotions. Douglass escaped to St. Michael's plantation with the hope of getting protection from Capt. Auld but unfortunately, he refused to protect him and because of this he says, "My master, who I did not venture to hope, would protect me as a MAN, had now refused to protect me as his property, and had cast me back..." (Douglass p-75).16

It was a war between good and evil, a bearer and torturer, the masters used all their strength to break down the slave physically and mentally. Douglass proved more powerful than his master as he continued to find meaning in life and was hopeful for future. Sometime frustration led him to depression particularly Covey's torture which was intolerable, Douglass in anger said: "What had I done, what had my parents done, that such a life as this should be mine?" (Douglass p-75). Further he states his pathetic condition by saying that "I suffered bodily as well as mentally. I had neither sufficient time in which to eat, or to sleep, except on Sundays. The over-work, and the brutal chastisements of which I was the victim, combined with that ever-gnawing and soul-devouring thought, "I am a slave –a slave for life-a slave with no rational ground to hope from freedom"- rendered me a living embodiment of mental and physical wretchedness. (Douglass p- 70) 17

In addition to the work of bringing wood from the forest, sometimes he was given the work of bringing wheat to the treading yard. In this, he was accompanied by Bill Hughes, Bill Smith and Eli, a slave who was hired for this work. Douglass and his team decided to do the work as fast as they could to gain an hour's rest at night as compensation which was promised by Covey if they succeeded in finishing their work in the given time. But unfortunately, Douglass' health got worse by which the entire work stopped as the whole work depended on one another.

16. Douglass p- 75

17. Douglass p- 70

Mr. Covey not hearing any sound came to the treading yard and seeing Douglass' critical position he shows his cruel nature by kicking him so hard and compels him to return to work. But unable to do this Douglass remains still which enrages Covey again and tortures him so much that Douglass himself explains in the horrible experience which can fill readers heart with pity and anger, the episode in autobiography as he narrates,

"While down in this sad condition, and perfectly helpless, the merciless negro-breaker took up the

hickory slab with which Hughes had been striking off the wheat to a level with the sides of the half bushel measure and with the edge of it he was handling made a large gash and caused the blood to run freely, saying at the same time, "If you have got headache I will cure you." (Douglass p-72) 18

Such kinds of physical harassment were not at all new to the slaves but Douglass as a small child was shocked to receive such a cruel punishment from his master. Regarding that day in which he was treated badly by Covey Douglass says: "...the day turned out to be one of the bitterest I ever experienced" (Douglass p- 71). 19

The whites were together when a slave asks for justice to one white against the other white. Douglass thought that Capt. Auld would take his side and understand his pains. Unable to bear Covey's torture Douglass escaped to St. Michael's plantation but he was not lucky by this act. Though Douglass narrated the story of his punishment by Covey to Capt. Auld, he defended Covey and ordered Douglass to return to him.

#### **New master and new challenges with Mr. William Freeland**

Changing places, masters and society was the destiny of a slave but what remains constant was his fate, agonies and pains. Sometime a change in the situation is hoped with new order but it seldom happened. Douglass's year-olds stay with Covey ended in 1834 and he was sold to another master Mr. William Freeland in 1835. His new master Mr. William Freeland, a ship builder was less cruel compared to Mr. Covey. Douglass explains the character of Freeland in these words, "...he seemed alive to the sentiment of honour, and had also some sense of justice, and some feelings of humanity" (Douglass, p- 84). 20

18. Douglass p-72

19. Douglass p- 71

20. Douglass, p- 84

The shift was not normal. Master Hugh hired Douglass from Mr. William Gardiner who was a ship builder on Fell's point. While working with Gardiner, Douglass was given money in return for his work on contract basis and his payment for a day was a dollar and fifty cents. Though the money was Douglass' rightful earning it was all taken away by his master Mr. Hugh though he did not earn it by any means. The injustice was very annoying and there was nobody who could listen to it. Douglass says, "my own hard earnings, every cent of it-was demanded of me and taken from me by Master Hugh. He did not earn it; he had no hand in earning it; why, then, should he have it?" (Douglass p-107). 21 Though Douglass owned him nothing his master had the power to force him for his money which made Douglass dissatisfied by looking at the brutal nature of slave holders. Whites

enjoyed the blood, sweat and mental trauma of blacks.

#### **Escape from Slavery towards racism**

The escape from slavery was impossible and most of the slaves either dies during the time or killed by their masters. Douglass hope for life, urge for better future and unprecedented will power helped him to break the shackles of slavery and fly into free world. Douglass finally escaped from Baltimore and from the cruel slavery on Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1838 and reached New York the next day as a freeman. Though he felt happy by escaping from slavery Douglass was not able to escape from the problem of his skin which was like an unending stigma to his life and the end of slavery opened a new door of racism that made his life horrible once again. He says: "In his colour was his badge of bondage" (Douglass p-118). 22 The new place was full of racial prejudice. He had faced the brutal treatments in the past and now it was facing mental harassments in a big city like New York. The board containing words like "Niggers are not allowed" was hanged on every public place which prohibited the entry of the Blacks into any public places. Not only this when Douglass went to attend the revival meeting in Rev. Henry Jackson's at New Bedford, he was stopped by a deacon who informed Douglass that the Blacks were not allowed. In another incident when Douglass had a meeting at Weymouth with a Western family, he faced the similar situation, and he was not allowed inside the house.

21. Douglass p-107

22. Douglass p-118

All this happened because of the skin colour and the worth of a person was not measured by the labour they put in, but by the dark complexion of their skin. The horrible experience of racism did not end with Douglass but was carried on to his children too. Douglass wanted to give education to his children like others and with this intention he admitted his daughter to the school of Miss Tracy. The daughter was also illtreated in her school by fellow mates and teachers. She was kept aloof from white students and the second generation was also subject to insulting treatment. Douglass sadly reports, "my daughter was excluded from "Tracy Seminary." (Douglass, p-156) 23 Further he adds, "My troubles attending the education of my children were not to end here. They were not allowed in the public school in the district in which I lived, owned property, and paid taxes, but were compelled, if they went to a public school, to go over to the other side of the city, to an inferior-coloured school. (Douglass, p-156-157) The entire life of Douglass went through tortures, pains and humiliations. It was a fate of Negro in those times. His next generation is passing through mental trauma and tragic experiences of racism. The autobiography towards the end records the true pains of a slave and his meditations on the system of slavery.

"He ( the slave system) had struck down my personality, had subjected me to his will, made property of my body and soul, reduced me to a chattel, hired me out to a noted slave breaker to be worked like a beast and flogged into submission; he had taken my hard earnings, sent me to prison, offered me for sale, broken up my Sunday-school, forbidden me to teach my fellow slaves to read on pain of nine and thirty lashes on my bare back; he had sold my body to his brother Hugh, and pocketed the price of my flesh and blood without any apparent disturbance of his conscience." (Douglass p-257) 24

These lines show us the brutality existed during slavery and what tragedies the slaves have gone through the history.

23.Douglass p-156

24.Douglass p-257

### Conclusion

Fredrik Douglass autobiography is unique and milestone because of more than one reasons. Written in a very candid way, Douglass opens a grave picture of slavery that existed in the democratic land of America. It was written in a period when the protest slavery was taking its wings from the writings of new writers, poets and thinkers. Douglass memoir was not the first of its kind that narrated the horrors of slavery, but it was certainly a text of its kind that portrayed the darker human side of slave system. The slavery narrated by the protagonist who was the subject of the agonies and pains, touches readers hearts and the autobiography also become historiography of an entire community as it represents not just a self but the self of all blacks who undergone an experience of slavery. Douglass autobiography recorded the highest selling book and ranked the bestselling category chart all over the world signifying the book's grip on the readers across the world, communities and cultures. The narrative became impressive among many of similar memoirs for some reasons and one of the significant factors was the narrative style of Douglass that involves reader through out the book. Another reason for the popularity of the book is the oratory skills of Douglass during his tours across America and other parts of the world as abolitionist and talking very strongly against the system of slavery and its supporters. People gathered in huge numbers to listen to him and seeing a strong, well-versed gentleman, it used to become very difficult to believe that such a man was slave throughout most part of his life. Newspaper coverage, interviews and advertisement boosted the sale and popularity of the text. The autobiography is indeed become a lighthouse to all slave narrators to publish their own stories and experiences to create a collage of slavery. Many writers who produced slave narratives later acknowledged the efforts of Douglass and paid their tributes to Douglass. Douglass proved a point that

slaves could educate themselves and could articulate their feelings and emotions like educated whites. The autobiography itself is a personification of victory a slave can imagine achieving.

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