

Study Material

On

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave By Frederick Douglas

For the students of The Department of English, University of Calcutta

MA Semester II

DSE II Nineteenth Century American Literature

Prepared by Dr. Sinjini Bandyopadhyay

Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Calcutta

I. Knowledge and Power:

If the trajectory of Frederick Douglass's life refers to a movement from oppression to liberty then it certainly involve a journey from ignorance to knowledge. Douglass's freedom is amenable to the urge of knowing. With an innate 'Humanist' zeal Douglas is keen to know the ideas of the world; language, history, space, culture and so on and at the same time is eager to trace his identity.

The issue of identity may be elaborated with reference to the following points:

- a) Confusion regarding his parental identity
- b) The rumour has it that his master is his father
- c) Vague memory of mother (Students may work upon the metaphor of the darkness of night as his mother was allowed to meet him only at night)
- d) Less attachment to his siblings who worked in the same plantation

Such an absence of proper familial identity exasperated Douglass's desire to establish an identity on his own which, he realized even at an early age, can be developed only with knowledge and learning. Douglass' journey towards freedom is coterminous with knowledge the begins with a programme for literacy that he chose for himself, continued with, despite hurdles of several sorts

coming along all the way and where he involves other fellow slaves. Students are here asked to consider the course of events that flow in this direction and incorporate the necessary details as and when required. Below is given hints of that course of events.

- a) Learning/literacy started at Baltimore under the guidance of Mrs. Auld.
- b) Mrs. Auld was warned by her husband.
- c) Learning stopped
- d) Douglass indulged in self-learning
- e) He started reading news paper secretly
- f) He learned from poor little white boys in exchange of bread that he had enough at Baltimore.

At this point students should stop and consider the interaction between Mrs. Auld and her husband about the consequence of educating slaves in chapter VII. The sporadic discontinuity however sparked a desire in Douglass, almost a Promethean desire to ‘steal’ the treasure of knowledge from the privileged class. This was almost like a revelation for a man who was looking forward to freedom so intently. Students should also take into account the sections in the same chapter when contemplates on the idea of freedom and feels how the contemplation is intricately linked to the process of learning. Douglass’s growth along the path of learning is one of graduation, from a learner to an educator, from a listener to a speaker. Students should also consider the following points in this connection.

- a) He opens a Sabbath school to educate other slaves when in the plantation of Mr. Freeland.
- b) He starts subscribing to a newspaper ‘Liberator’
- c) He delivers a speech for the first time before white men in a convention

II. Christianity/Religion:

A thorough reading of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* corroborates to the idea that even amidst the suffering, wretchedness and oppression Frederick Douglass never lost faith in humanity. Nor did he lose faith in himself. His ideas and outlooks are absolutely positive even during the most crucial phase of tests and trials. His inner sensibility was tinged with affection and love for fellow slaves, respect for white men and masters, if deserved, and a sense of piety for human beings at large. All these tender and humane emotions seem to have been derived from his understanding of Christianity vis-à-vis religion. The idea of ‘justice’, that Douglass thinks is provided by God, is itself a Christian concept and helps him to embrace the positive force and novel enterprises of life. His journey from a slave to self-made man, an orator and an abolitionist is informed by his understanding Christianity. In chapter II, the death of Mr. Severe,

one of the cruelest overseers of slaveholders is “regarded by the slaves as the result of merciful providence”.

It should also be noted that the autobiography does not venerate Christianity entire. Douglass’s understanding of religion is interfaced with a critique. The experiences and events of his life which at any point could have generated an antipathy towards religion are given below:

- a) Captain Auld, Douglass’s master for a long period was religious person, a Methodist. Douglas conjectured that religion has made him crueler.
- b) Similar was the case with Mr. Covey whose cruelty was unparalleled.
- c) Students should also consider the mention of other cruel slaveholders who were religious persons in neighbouring plantations.

But Douglass also chronicles the benefit of religion and good Christian persons like, George Cookman, Mr. Samuel Harrison and Mr. Wilson in his autobiography. They, in some way or other contributed to the development of the life of slaves.

Frederick Douglass uses the references from Bible and such references enrich and keep informing the narrative layers of the autography especially when it comes to exploring the idea of knowledge and learning. Few examples are given below.

- a) The fruit garden in chapter III is biblical metaphor
- b) In several contemplative passages in the text Douglass often considered knowledge as curse and ignorance as bliss. Such a realization is an oblique reference to Bible
- c) Douglass’s rebellion against white master/s is symptomatic of the conflict between God and Satan. This argument seems more convincing when after imprisonment Master releases him but does not allow him to go back to the plantation as there has been resistance among the slaveholders as they thought such rebellious nature might turn contagious and Douglass might influence other slaves to rebel, resist and run away.

III. Resistance, empowerment:

The words, mentioned above, mark a journey; a journey towards freedom. The arrangement of the words entails a stage-wise development. Such development seems to be the crux of the autobiography. An attempt, in this section, will be made to chart out the traces of each stage of development and to show they contribute to the organic growth of the narrative of the text vis-à-vis the events of the life of Frederick Douglass.

Resistance is primarily a realization, an absence and an unprecedented phenomenon rather than a reality, an action as described in the few beginning chapters in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The idea of resistance comes of his realization of the exploitation, suffering and the deprivation of American (especially in the North) slaves. Frederick starts narrating his

personal experience of suffering much later. He starts by narrating the condition of other slaves. He chronicles his experience of watching other slaves being terribly tortured when he was just a little kid. Below are given few examples:

- a) The description of how Aunt Hester is whipped by Mr. Plummer
- b) Children born as consequence of rape of female slaves were forced to take their mothers' profession and were often sold
- c) The description of living condition of slaves; of food, clothes and accommodation
- d) Long working hour for slaves and the working condition as described in almost every chapter
- e) How a slave was sold for answering simple question by his master Colonel Lloyd whom he had never met before in person
- f) Demby, a slave was shot to death by Mr. Gore, the overseer for no reason (Chapter IV)
- g) Students should take into account the details of the killing of slaves that follow in the same chapter
- h) Students should separately identify and analyse the sections that detail violence on women

However, Douglass's personal involvement with resistance is amenable to empowerment. Before he started experiencing hard labour, suffering and torture intensely he was already empowered with language and literacy which have imbued him with the spirit of freedom. Therefore his suffering is immediately accompanied by an active resistance. Let us chart out some examples:

- a) Back to his old master at St. Michael's after seven years he experiences frequent whipping
- b) He is let out to another slaveholder, Mr. Covey who held "a very high reputation for breaking young slaves" for the purpose of discipline
- c) Douglass's failure to manage the oxen cart followed by a sever whipping by Mr. Covey
- d) Douglass fainted, out of weakness, while fanning wheat and severely beaten by Mr. Covey
- e) He walked seven miles with bleeding wounds on his head to lodge complaint against Mr. Covey to his master which may be considered as the first step towards resistance
- f) Later when Mr. Covey came to beat Douglass he was already so inspired by a spirit of resistance that he fought back not just out of the impulse of self defense but to express his

long suppressed anger for the race of the white slaveholders. “My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers.”

All narratives addressing the issue of empowerment place special emphasis on financial independence. Financial independence is a chief marker of one’s empowerment. Douglass can work upon the ideas of self-empowerment and freedom only when he starts earning. Let us examine his movement along the line of self-empowerment in terms of financial independence as described in chapter XI:

- a) Once rescued from prison Douglass is sent to his old home at Baltimore and is apprenticed at Gardner’s for learning calking, carpentry and many other things required for ship building
- b) After his fight with white carpenters he starts working independently on daily basis labour and was supposed to submit the wage to his master
- c) He starts considering the wage his own right
- d) He hires time, saves money and runs away for freedom (students expected to know the details fro chapter XI)

IV. Slavery, slave narratives and abolitionist movement:

The system of slavery, probably invented by the Europeans and later adopted American from seventeenth century onwards is contested and critiqued as abolitionist movements starts with the initiative of free slaves and white Americans in the north. This socio-cultural process is chronicled in the entire oeuvre of the slave narrative a majority of which is autobiographical in nature.

In America the system of slavery was introduced by the Spanish who arrived in the continent earlier than other European nations. They primarily ventured into enslaving the native Indians, but they were too fierce and at times they could not resist the diseases brought by the white settlers. They died in great numbers. Naturally, the planters had to resort to the practice of deploying the Africans, the Negroes as slaves. They were stolen, captured and forced to be slaves in rice, cotton and tobacco plantations. A vessel brought twenty Negroes in the English colony of Jamestown in 1619. These Negroes were primarily employed as indentured labourers who were to be freed after a few years of service. The supply of slaves to entire country was made through Cheapskay bay, as mention in Frederick Douglass’s autobiography. These slaves were used as unskilled labourers in plantations and as servants in households. Slaves were given neither

education nor training for any specific kind of work as they master were also afraid of the enlightenment and any special skill of the slaves.

The contexts and the condition hitherto mentioned in the section should sound familiar as the beginning chapters of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* truthfully chronicle them. Such chronicles are the dominant narrative components of any slave narrative and therefore this autobiography, along with two others, written by Douglass, squarely falls in the tradition of early slave narratives like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*.

Let us here reiterate some of the narrative codes common to the genre of slave narratives. They also form Douglass's understanding of life and reality. However some of them have already been identified in other sections of this study material:

- a) A lack in parental identity
- b) Often the presence of a white father who enslaves his own children
- c) Experience of physical torture, primarily whipping
- d) The suffering of the slaved is narrated in the songs sung by slaves in plantations. These songs develop to be Blues and Jazz in future and define what is known as the culture of America. Douglass devotes many passages
- e) The journey from counter to city
- f) Sexual violence on women
- g) Slaves brutally killed, as it happens to Demby

But all slave narratives offer inkling to resistance, empowerment and finally the beginning of abolitionist movement. Resistance to slave trade began in 1710 when Virginia attempted to check it with a levy of five pound on each slave. Confederation congress in 1787 planned a law against slavery but could implement it in 1808, though with no effect. Emancipation of slaves actually begins when a large number of slaves escape and organize in proper way, often being supported by the white people in the North. Abolitionist movement is also an intellectual movement, a cultural process along with being uprising by slaves. Newspapers and magazines played an important role in this movement. Oration and public speaking are pertinent to the movement as awareness had to be raised in order to foster the spirit for the emancipation of slaves. Frederick Douglass, himself a public speaker, had been voicing for the freedom of the slaves for many years of his life. Students are expected to read two other autobiographical writings by Douglass and the prefaces from authentic editions. Students should consider the following points and read the autobiography as a slave narrative and as a manifesto of abolitionist movement:

- a) The process of Douglass's enlightenment and learning
- b) His zeal for freedom
- c) Physical fight with Mr. Covey
- d) The actual act of running away
- e) Help from white men like Mr. Ruggles
- f) Emotional bond with other slaves
- g) His financial independence
- h) Reading of books and magazines on abolitionist movement
- i) Finally his first public speaking in a convention which may be marked as a moment of freedom

Suggested Reading:

The American Story, Ruth Wood Gavian and William A. Hamm, D G Heath and Company, Boston, 1944.

Slavery in America, Dorothy Schneider, Carl J. Schneider, Facts on Life Publication, New York, 2007.

Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation, John Craig Hammond, Matthew Mason, University of Virginia Press, Chicago, 2011.