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**THE RECOVERY OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS**

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**Abstract:**

"Douglass deliberates the only two options he believes are available: "to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to death" (Phillips, Wendell. P.3)The Narrative explains the strategies and procedures by which whites gain and keep power over blacks from their birth onward. Slave owners keep slaves ignorant of basic facts about themselves, such as their birth date or their paternity. This enforced ignorance robs children of their natural sense of individual identity. As slave children grow older, slave owners prevent them from learning how to read and write, as literacy would give them a sense of self-sufficiency and capability. Slaveholders understand that literacy would lead slaves to question the right of whites to keep slaves. Finally, by keeping slaves illiterate, Southern slaveholders maintain control over what the rest of America knows about slavery. If slaves cannot write, their side of the slavery story cannot be told.This study aims to illustrateFrederick Douglass's attempt to regain his identity as a human who has his rights to live freely in this life in the American society. American society, throughout the narrative of this novel, shows how white slaveholders create slavery by keeping their slaves ignorant to be able to control them mentally and

psychologically. So, by studying this particular narrative about the southern slave system, the research is going to have good understanding of not only the community of southern slaves but also American society as a whole.

"The content of Douglass' Narrative was essentially the same material which he had presented countless times as a roving Abolitionist spokes-man." (Phylon, P. 15)

Frederick Douglass is considered to be as one of the most important writers during the civil rights and racial equality struggle in America. He has affected positively on the politics and writings of the major African-American writers. However, he is an inspired person on the African Americans writers' too. He contributed a great deal to save the enslaved people in and outside America. He calls for the freedom, self-discovery, and identity as it is considered to be a testament for all time, for all people.

As it is stated by himself:

My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (p. 16)

The story itself illustrates the tradition and beliefs by which the narrative of the book occurred. The writer took an attempt to call for the freedom to the people like his case.

The way Douglass lives his life is so wearied as he is given to Captain Anthony where his journey really starts to discover his life. Sophia Auld wishes to teach him because of her kindness in spite of her husband's refusal as he was following the saying 'education makes slaves unmanageable'.

The skill of Douglass' platform performance on tour began to raise doubts. He spoke too well. The sophisticated style and learned tone which he rapidly developed seemed out of character. Collins advised him, "People won't believe you ever were a slave, Frederick, if you keep on this way.... Better have a little of the plantation speech than not." Since he did not talk, look, or act like a slave (in the eyes of Northern audiences), Douglass was denounced as an imposter. There could be but one effective rejoinder to this Yankee skepticism. (Phylon, P. 16)

Douglass keeps himself happy in Baltimore as it is a city for inspiration for him. He is facing by that the cruelty of Sophia and Hugh Auld towards him. He looks for new positive life by the help of the local boys who taught him how to read and write. This is a good reason which makes him aware of the negative attitudes of slavery.

The participations of the black people was largely controlled by white leaders despite the diversity of life in America. Douglass said in the mid-1850s: "Opposing slavery and hating its victims has come to be a very common form of abolitionism." (Ibid)

Baltimore gives him the first push to revolt against the owners of the slaves and as a result he escapes to the North eventually. "Douglass' lack of formal education and who was an asset consciously exploited by Abolitionists who toured with him". (Ibid)

Douglass loses interests in education as he has been sold out to another man Edward Covey by the help of Thomas Auld who was very mean with Douglass. He was suffering to recognize his identity as Covey work and whip all the spirit out of him. Douglass tunes to be an aggressive person to release himself from the impact of Covey as he states fighting him for two hours.

After the deaths of Captain Anthony and his remaining heirs, Douglass is taken back to serve Thomas Auld, Captain Anthony's son in law. Auld is a mean man made harsher by his false religious piety. Auld considers Douglass unmanageable, so Auld rents him for one year to Edward Covey, a man known for "breaking" slaves. Covey manages, in the first six months, to work and whip all the spirit out of Douglass.

Douglass becomes a brutish man, no longer interested in reading or freedom, capable only of resting from his injuries and exhaustion. The turning point comes when Douglass resolves to fight back against Covey. The two men have a two hour fight, after which Covey never touches Douglass again.

Douglass was put in another problem as he has been rented to William Freeland for two years. "In Frederick Douglass's journey there was a clear description of his life from the absolute ignorance to knowledge, from an oppressed slave to a free man, from zero to hero and especially from childhood to maturity." (Mr Seif Eddine Guettaia, p. 30) This prison makes him stronger as he gets an attempt to educate his fellow slaves in a Sabbath school at the homes of free blacks. Douglass has a feeling that he is really living in this life despite the threat of punishment and violence of many slaves from neighboring farms who come to Douglass and work diligently to learn.

At Freeland, despite Douglass's courageous attempt to escape with three fellow slaves with whom he is close, he and his friends were sent to jail as their plane brook down because of betraying. This new harsh turn in the life of the protagonist pushes him forwards to discover the true facts about his real life. Of course this point helped him to learn more in this life when Thomas Auld sends Douglass back to Baltimore with Hugh Auld, to learn the trade of ship caulking.

Now after all these difficulties, Douglass has to face a new obstacles in his life. He becomes much stronger to release himself from the negative effects of slave owners when he quickly learns the general concepts of trade industry in Baltimore. He stood against the inequality competition between the black and white slaves in the opportunities to get the best jobs. 'White workers have been working alongside free black workers, but the whites have begun to fear that the increasing numbers of free blacks are going to take their jobs'. This is considered as a course of training for him. He, later on, learns the trade of caulking and soon earns the highest wages possible, always turning them over to Hugh Auld. It is called as the real tragedy of slaves.

Slavery as a system was very disgusting and detestable. It destroyed the fate of people and persecuted them physically and mentally demolishing the slave and the slave-master as well. They were never allowed to enjoy the fruits of their labor. In fact, slaves were constantly kept hungry. Their owners were using Douglass as a machine, as he has taken a permission from Hugh Auld to hire out his extra time. Douglass, thus, saves a bit money to enjoy his life in New York. Eventually, he refused to describe every single events of his escape to New York. It is just because he wants to protect the future of

slaves for having an attempt of the same risky journey to cure themselves from such illness.

Douglass' life reveals itself with the fact about his birth and parentage; his father is a slave owner and his mother is a slave. This fact made him to realize the misery of other slaves like his condition. It also reveals the hidden truth of the identity of the upcoming generation in that period due to the practice of the 'white slave owners raping slave women, both to satisfy their sexual hungers and to expand their slave populations'. "The white masters pursue the idea of keeping their own slaves 'ignorant' about their person, as the slavery-system did not consider the "humanity" of slaves. Indeed, they were considered 'rather as brutish than human' as they were deprived not only of information about their own birth date, but also of their family ties." (Dayana Ferrara, P.3)

The obstacles of the religious beliefs made the life of Douglass as bad as if there was no life to live in. The hypocrisy of Christian slaves owners who used religious teachings to justify their abhorrent treatment of slaves; the inhuman religious practice of slave owners toward the life of such character 'Douglass'. "Douglass's re-drafting of African religious practices and his conjuring of Eleggua/Eshu suggests that the ideological roots of black radicalism may have preceded the formation of the intelligentsia on which Robinson's Black Marxism focuses." (Phillips, Wendell. P.8)

Douglass has done a lot of controversy actions in his behavior which putted him in a critical situation with the people and other slaves in his city. As it is stated by himself "the only explanation I can now think of does not entirely satisfy me" (p,51). He argues against the notion that 'slaves who sing are content; instead, he likens singing to crying which is a way to relieve sorrow'. This is of course due to the brutal beatings and the murder of a slave, which even goes unnoticed by the law or the community at large. It is also because of the false system of values created by slavery, in which 'allegiance to the slave master is far stronger than an allegiance to other slaves'. It is thus slaves like Douglass is treated just like animals. 'Slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs'.

Douglass shows how far the misery of his life has mad him to think madly. He clearly explained that in his narrative: "if any madman could alienate himself, he could not alienate his children; they are born men and free; their liberty belongs to them, and no one but they has the right to dispose of it" (p.10).

Douglass even deprived from the sense of feeling that he has a parents. He clearly indicated that in his narrative: "The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me" (p.13). He has separated from his mother to by his slave owner for the sake of controlling him and treated the other slaves the same way as well. It is simply because the slave owners want to break the unity of the family to make them loose their heritage and identity. Douglass intends to direct the readers to have an opinion about the brutality of the slaves' life. He indicts, "For what reason this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child" (p.13).

Even the raping of black woman by the white man, who is considered her master, is a sensitive facts in Douglass's life. He stated: "kept almost naked no shoes, no stockings, no

jacket, no trousers, nothing but a coarse linen shirt" (p.23). This paradoxical fact is left behind, by his father, in his way to search about the true meaning of life he is searching for. This is because the master is frequently compelled to sell his mulatto children 'out of deference to the feelings of his white wife'. For the wife, her husband's mulatto children are living reminders of his infidelity'.

Douglass is asking himself frequently 'why the only black skin people are treated as slaves?'. He wanted to justify his real existence as he is considered one of the mixed-race children whom are treated as slaves. This is related to an ancient myth of slavery. People, who were living in the south, at the nineteenth century, were believing that God cursed Ham, the son of Noah, by turning his skin black and his descendants into slaves. So, the upcoming generations from Ham were predestined by the scriptures to be slaves. This fact exceeded Douglass's thinking of his identity and in the same way his fearing of enlarging the number of slaves like this case in the future. Douglass felt happy too as he wishes he could fix such problem if the natural law of population expansion will allow his people to prevail.

Slave owners were so mean in their way of dealing with the slaves including Douglass himself. Douglass recognizes that slave owners were hiring spies to ruin the slaves' life by brainwashed to make them believe that their lot is better than it really is. It is to the extent that slaves were fighting among themselves to have the best slave owner. This is explained according to Douglass as 'destroying the solidarity among slaves'. So, 'the loyalty has become a matter of pledging allegiance to one's owner and not to one's brother'.

However, Slave owners were further treating slaves as animals. Douglass did not know to whom he belongs to as a son. He did not even know whether his mother is dead before, nor felt connected with his grandmother too. Therefore, he felt alienated having no positive value to live with in this life.

Douglass got the positive spirit of feeling a life when he moved to Baltimore. He becomes no longer need for the white master to protect him after he encountered with one of them. Baltimore is a new journey to a new fresh life for him. At least, he realizes the two faces of the religious people in Baltimore which is characterized largely by hypocrisy. "In the Narrative, even when Douglass explicitly acknowledges the Bible's utility in Christian justifications of slavery, he does not seem to criticize the Bible itself, only its interpreters". (Zachary Mod Hutchins, P. 297)

Baltimore victimizes Douglass too as a result to his conditions. He becomes a responsible man as he cares for the other slaves around him. He, therefore, decided to educate himself. "Education becomes the way through which he can express with words his interior mood and inner feelings, externalizing his condition of "slave." (Dayana Ferrara, p.8)

He faces a lot of troubles as a result to that. His masters did not agree for that education as it is going to make slaves strong enough to call for their freedom. Douglass staidly mentioned that in his novel; "I now understood the white man's power to enslave the black man. I was gladdened by the invaluable instructor which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master."

Douglass's life got worst after the death of his master. As a rule of the slave owners. Slavers were sold to other slave owner which made their conditions reportedly much worse. Douglass adds, "At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder."

Richard Yarborough an African American scholar (1993) suggests, "when writers like Douglass say 'man' they mean 'human,' and when they say 'manhood' they mean 'humanity'" (p.167). Douglass suffers to realize his true brother as human. Slaves were treated like animals since they brought together at their young ages. Thus, they were treated without any touch of humanity. Douglass himself speculates that Captain Anthony could have been his father. He also suffers from the bad treatment of the females in the host families of the slave owners. His mother, as an example, was used as a tool of enjoyment, after having served Captain Anthony for money, as he got wealth from the raping of slaves.

As he stated by himself:

"Douglass's claim of innate manhood is an essential aspect of his narrative's rhetorical strategy, as he hopes to prove the universal humanity of people of African ancestry in a time when many questioned the assumption that a slave, a "brute beast," a "marketable commodity" was inherently endowed with manhood and a soul". (p.166).

There were class differences even among the slave owners. Douglass recognized that Thomas Auld was one of the slave owners who tries to appear as one of the high class people. He is considered as one of the those who were not allowed to own slaves due to his poverty. Such rules in that society were also so mean as religious slaves owners look as an angles when they quoted chapter and verse of their religion but were savagely cruel to their slaves. Covey was also one of them as he was working with his hands which make him feel what of work each slave could achieve. His weapon of strength was his ability to deceive others to the extent that Douglass thinks Covey may have fooled himself into believing that he was a religious person.

Though McFeely (1991, p. 84) mentioned that "Douglass could not marry the two religions, Christianity and antislavery, though one led to the other,". To some extent, religion makes Douglass has a piece of mind. "He offers a new, substitute Bible in which religion and freedom are predicated not on faith and submission but on action and rebellion". (ZACHARY MCLEOD HUTCHINS, P. 310)

He was speaking silently to God while watching the ships on Chesapeake Bay, sailing toward the Northern states. He, thus, becomes psychologically free for once the mind is freed, the body will follow'.

Frederick Douglass had many qualities such as the patience, the courage and the endurance. Even when things and situations became very difficult for him and his fellow slaves, he had a noteworthy ability to hide and point his anger to the right side and the good way of resistance distinguished by maturity and wisdom. (Mr Seif Eddine Guettaia, p. 30)

Douglass was feeling happy even to the less minimum period of joys. He states: "I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed, the horses. I obeyed, and was glad to obey". (p. 53) His master was providing a certain number of holidays for their slaves to keep insurrections cold. Holidays are also important for the slave owners to encourage drunkenness among the slaves. They intend to degraded the slaves, believing that such acts are the ultimate freedom in their life. In the same time Owners need holidays, too, for they can't spend all year managing and overseeing slaves. Implicit in Douglass' arguments is his criticism of his fellow slaves who allow themselves to be subjugated by alcohol'.

Douglass was suffering from the system which made people slaves by force. He has indicated that through his narrative, "He exposes how the system rigorously strips the slave of a means of self-identity, agency, voice, and community while educating him to internalize his lowly position in society through the ever-present threat of violence. (Evan Regis, P.184)

It is considered as an experienced thief who could steal the happy life of slaves." Douglass recognizes that he, like all slaves, is not only "a victim of biblical logic" and mortal exegesis but also a victim of the Bible itself and the biblical, immortal Christian God". ( ZACHARY MCLEOD HUTCHINS, P. 315)

In addition to that, the fruits of slave labor are enjoyed only by slaveholders. He states: "I appeared before my master, humbly entreating him to interpose his authority for my protection" (p. 52)

When Douglass was in New Bedford, he experienced the sensitive tread of slaves. Such a tread was so dangerous to the extent that he could not find a suitable job by his choice just because of racism. He could explain that as he says 'First, he was still intoxicated with freedom in the North and any racism he experienced there would have been minor compared to what he underwent in the South. Second, he did not want to alienate his Northern hosts; as a fugitive, he certainly would not have wanted to confront racist Northerners who could inform slave hunters of his whereabouts. The power of slave hunters in the free states was a contentious issue for many years. Later, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 would legitimize fugitive slave hunting in free states'.

Therefore, Douglass was trying to fix almost all of his slavery problems by the help of money as it is considered a necessary key for freedom and a key as important as knowledge. This is mainly because he compares the two ways of slaves life who live in the north as well as in the south. The northern slaves are more healthier, happier, and prosperous than those in the South as slave holders start to replace some of them with machines.

To keep slaves ignorant is the key of success of the slave holders. They deprived them from discovering their beautiful life because they believe that that slavery was a natural state of being." Douglass's opinion that ignorance makes slaves bestial and animalistic; slaveholders withhold knowledge in order to prevent their slaves from becoming fully human". ( Zachary Mcleod Hutchins, P. 310)

Slave holders are also believe that 'blacks were inherently incapable of participating in civil society and thus should be kept as workers for whites. In addition to that 'If slaves

cannot write, their side of the slavery story cannot be told. Wendell Phillips makes this point in his prefatory letter to the Narrative.

Douglass shows in his narrative that "men will not enter any contract in which they have nothing to gain but "their miseries" (pp.910). Slavery brings damages not only to the slaves but to the slave holders too. It corrupts the moral behaviors of the slave holders. Douglass shows this fact when the slave holders start to commit a sinful acts like a adultery with their slaves. Therefore, it breaks the unity of the slave owner's family as the father is forced to either sell or perpetually punish his own child, while the slave owner's wife becomes resentful and cruel'.

Douglass also asserts in his narrative: "To say that a man gives himself gratuitously, is to say what is absurd and inconceivable; such an act is null and illegitimate, from the mere fact that he who does it is out of his mind. To say the same of a whole people is to suppose a people of madmen" (p.10).

Even readers can assume that Douglass's Narrative shows "that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of [his] brethren in bonds" (p. 85).

A new voice could be created at the end of the narrative by Douglass himself by the help of the positive effect of the word – when he was silenced during the period of slavery. His personality could be illustrated through the double use of the pronoun 'I' which represents, first of all, as being slave and on the second hand, it represents as being free man.

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