

Resistance to Resilience: Reading Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*

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Abstract

Frederick Douglass' autobiographies are the saga of his experience and observation of deprivation, cruelty, injustice, protest etc. This paper would deal with the first autobiography of Douglass and offers briefly about how the genre autobiography is a tool of resistance to atrocities on human beings. Further, this paper would uncover various motifs of resistance like disobey, protest, violence, challenge, evasion, and question to undermine the power of institution of slavery delineated in the autobiography. As a slave narrative Douglass' autobiography can be read as resistance to power and inhuman treatment.

Douglass' autobiography which was penned down in 1845 gives the glimpses of horrific events of slavery and simultaneously build up the personality of the author against all odds, i.e., from resistance to resilience. The Narrative is the portrayal of how a man was turned in to a slave and his heroic rise thereafter and eventually making himself a free man again. Thereby it offers a corrective discourse and positive vision for life.

Keywords: Resistance, Power, Slavery, Autobiography

The term 'resistance' has *resistere* as its Latin root signifying to "stand against." 'Resistance,' originally a term in science and engineering, "denotes a slow but insistent, invisible but enduring behavioral strategy having the potential to dislodge the dominant structure, if not dismantle it" (Bande 1). The *Webster's New World College Dictionary* offers four definitions of resistance: (a) "The act of resisting, opposing, withstanding etc.," (b) "Power or capacity to resist," (c) "Opposition of some force... to another or others," and (d) "A force that retards, hinders or opposes motion . . ." (qtd. in Knowles and Linn 4).

Since autobiographical narrative is an account of personal life and author's response to the public life as well, here resistance of both narrator and public comes at a parallel level. We do find individual resistance to certain dominant relationship and collective resistance as well. An important feature of resistance in autobiographical narrative is the challenge they pose to hegemonic history. While narrating the life, the writer generally seeks to document

the experience, to correct misinformation, to educate their readers and to encourage the continuation of struggle (Perkins 70). The writer challenges the false and dominated view of history created by the oppressor. Here Barbara Harlow asserts that, "The connection between knowledge and power, the awareness of the exploitation of knowledge by the interest of power to create a distorted historical record, is central to resistance narratives" (116). She further notes that, "the struggle over the historical record is seen from all sides as no less crucial than the armed struggle" (7).

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, later known as Frederick Douglass was an African-American writer, abolitionist, former slave, and social activist. He has written three autobiographies. Those are: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892). All these three autobiographies are the saga of his experience and observation of deprivation, cruelty, injustice, protest etc. It resulted in his individual resistance which finally leads him to liberation. His resistance was neither instant nor spontaneous. When the meaning and reality of slavery unfolded, he developed and indeed learned the resistance and self respect.

According to Paul Routledge resistance is "any action imbued with intent that attempts to challenge, change or retain particular circumstances relating to societal relations, processed and / or institutions. . ." (qtd. in Baaz et al. 140). The instances of resistance are seen in the very first chapter of the autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. It presents readers about the birth place and his mother without providing an exact date of his birth and his father's name. Douglass' confusion about this provides an account of the treatment of slaves in a slaveholder farm. His mother Harriet Bailey was separated from him when he was an infant. It was done to destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. However, its effect made the mother more affectionate. His mother was hired by Mr. Stewart and lives twelve miles away from him. It was his mother who defies the severe punishment and permission to stay inside, and would visit Douglass very often at night. Douglass asserts it as "She made her journey to see me at night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after a performance of her day's work . . . I don't recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of the day. She was with me in the night" (Douglass 2). Thus the act of Douglass' mother is the manifestation of resistance delineated by the author against the institution of slavery.

His mother passed away soon but it seemed Douglass learned the act of resistance from his mother. This chapter gives another glimpse of resistance when Aunt Hester breaks the rules imposed by Captain Anthony. Aunt Hester was not allowed not only to go out but also forbidden to meet a young man, Ned Roberts. But she resists both and sets an example of resistance. Apart from these two incidents Douglass' autobiography also cites collective resistance to the slavery system. Slaves' resistance comes in terms of music while they would go to the home of their master, i.e., the great house to receive their monthly allowances.

According to Robin Balliger music is “a form of resistance against domination” and as far as victims of slavery are concerned, it has been “a central site for the intervention in dominant discourses and for creating forms of expression that are culturally affirming” (Balliger 14). Though Douglass fails to comprehend the words being connected to strange words, he puts emphasis on the feelings from the tone of the songs. Each tone defies the slavery’s control over them and is an act of collective resistance. Their songs celebrate the inner desire for the wish of the freedom. Douglass views thus: “Every tone was a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. . . . To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery” (Douglass 12). The instance of resistance to Colonel Lloyd’s regulation imposed to access his cultivated garden is vivid in the third chapter. The starved slaves defy the severe punishment and would steal fruit to fill their stomach (13). Moreover, one slave named Demby disobeys the order of overseer Mr. Gore and lost his life. He wanted to get rid of the severe punishment by running away. Douglass writes thus:

He had given Demby few stripes, when to get rid of the scourging, he ran and plunged himself into a creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulder, refusing to come out. Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call he would shoot him. The first call was given. Demby made no response, but stood his ground. The second and third calls were given with the same result, Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with anyone, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. (Douglass 19-20)

Douglass’ autobiography gives a grim picture of his survival during his childhood period. His suffering was due to lack of food and clothes. He was almost kept naked in hottest summer and coldest winter. He was provided with only a shirt which reaches to knees. He used to steal a bag and would crawl into the bag. Then he was sent to Baltimore at the age of eight to live with Mr. Auld. The Baltimore episode in his autobiography serves as a turning point in his life. He left the Colonel Lloyd’s plantation and became a city slave. Here he was assigned to take care of the child of Mr. Auld. His new mistress was kind enough to teach him the alphabets of English. He was a quick learner and she assisted him in learning to spell words of three or four letter. But here comes the dominance of Mr. Auld. He forbade his wife to teach Douglass further and showed his hegemonic power. Douglass quotes his dominance as: “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world” (29). But for Douglass it was a special revelation and he took it as a grand achievement. He understood it as a gateway to liberty and hence he was more determined to learn. He says that, “though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read” (29).

It was an uphill task to learn in those surrounding for Douglass. He was being watched most narrowly. But he challenges the power of the slaveholder and question the dominance. Eventually he made white little boys as friends and converted them as teachers. In this way he succeeded in learning to read and understood the meaning of words like abolition and abolitionist. Being a slave and learning to read at the same time was an unpardonable offence during that time. His curiosity to be a free man developed and he wanted to learn how to write. He learned to write during his work at shipyard. Douglass asserts thus: “during this time, my copy book was the board fence, brick wall and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these I learned mainly how to write” (38). He purchased a Webster dictionary, the local newspaper and Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator* which stimulated his curiosity. It took nearly seven years to Douglass to succeed in learning to read and write in Baltimore. It was Douglass’ disguised resistance against a racist socio political structure to subvert the whole system. The concept disguised resistance which is famously known as “everyday resistance” was first introduced by anthropologist James C. Scott in his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, which is based on the Malay peasants’ class struggle. Being the pioneer of “everyday resistance” he views resistance thus:

any act (s) by member (s) of a subordinate class that is or are *intended* either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by super ordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those super ordinate classes. (Scott *Weapons* 290)

Moreover, with reference to Scott’s “everyday resistance” theorists like Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson in the article “Everyday Resistance: Exploration of a Concept and its Theories” views that, “Everyday resistance is about how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power.” Further, It is not “easily recognized like public or collective resistance —such as rebellions or demonstrations— but it is typically hidden or disguised, individual and not politically articulated” (2). The act of leaning to escape from the clutches of slavery was hidden and being a subordinate, Douglass resistance is a threat to institution of slavery. Thus Douglass’ disguised resistance is manifested in the autobiography *Narrative*.

After Baltimore Douglass was sent back to plantation and hired to Edward Covey. Mr. Covey was infamous for his ability to break the bodies and spirits of slaves. Douglass describes him as a person who wanted to maximize the production. He would approach slaves at irregular times in order to catch them by surprise. He was a threat to slaves and therefore it was unsafe for slaves to stop work for a single minute. Douglass says that, “His comings were like a thief in the night. He appeared to us as being ever at hand. He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush and at every window on the plantation” (Douglass 53).

Before coming to the plantation of Edward Covey, Douglass had already learned to read. Douglass describes his experience at the platform as, "I was broken in body soul and spirit. My natural elastic 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!" (55). It speaks a lot about that Mr. Covey was able to suppress his intellectual progress and reduced him to a beast. Covey's inhuman treatment stimulates him to flee. He returned to his former owner Mr. Auld to protest against Covey's treatment, but he commanded him to go back to Covey.

On the next day while Douglass was at work Covey attacked him. In an unprecedented move Douglass fought back. He did not try to be a submissive slave though he was well aware of the fact that his counter attack could lead to his death. But he fought back. Douglass delineates thus: "Mr. covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment- from whence came the spirit I don't know- I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose"(62). Mr. Covey was absolutely taken aback and Douglass could find fear in the eyes of his master. These two hours of his fight against his master was unprecedented for a slave like Douglass and turning point in his career. In order to save his reputation Mr. Covey never punished Douglass. It boosted his self confidence, manhood and inspired him to be more determined to be free. By fighting with Mr. Covey, Douglass affirms his own strength and manhood but more importantly challenges the system of institutional slavery. Douglass mentions this episode as an "epoch" and asserts thus: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (57). It subsequently speaks volumes about his resilience when he says that he was never whipped after that incident. He writes thus: "I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery to the heaven of freedom" (63).

Douglass worked as a caulker in Baltimore and used to earn six dollars a week. He would give all amounts to Master Hugh. Master Hugh encourages him to keep up the good work and would give him six cents as gift. This gift indeed stimulated Douglass' claim to the whole which resists the master-slave relationship. Douglass says that, "I regarded it as a sort of admission of my right to the whole" (88). Asking question is a motif of resistance. In a work of art we do find the oppressed class people's questions against oppression. The moment they begin to ask question to themselves or the ruling class, it qualifies as resistance. It is the awareness and knowledge of being oppressed matters a lot followed by trying to know the reason of oppression. Remco Campert, the Dutch author and poet says that, "Asking yourself a question, that's how resistance begins And then ask that very question to someone else" (qtd. in Hannah). It is clearly evident in Frederick Douglass' autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. The very first chapter reinforces this when Douglass questions the deprivation of a privilege of knowing his age like the white boys. He says that, "The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I

ought to be deprived of the same privilege” (Douglass 1) and thus exposes inequality. Further, Douglass asks questions about the nature and history of institution of slavery. He asks thus which manifests two motifs of resistance simultaneously: escape and question. He writes thus: “O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand to it. Get caught or get clear, I will try it” (Douglass 56). He eventually escapes from the evil and horrific clutches of slavery and attains freedom by reaching New York in 1838.

In a nutshell there is both individual and collective resistance in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. Both forms of resistance speak a lot about how a particular group of people was oppressed by hegemonic power. Douglass emphatically strikes the motifs of resistance like disobey, protest, violence, challenge, evasion, disloyalty, injustice etc. throughout this autobiography. He employs these motifs to resist slavery. Douglass’ main goal behind the resistance is to set socio-political rights. Thus he rises from being a slave to a free man advocating equality in the society. This autobiography was published during the pre-civil war era and it serves as an anti-slavery propaganda. Moreover, throughout the autobiography, Douglass is able to question the hegemonic power and offers corrective discourse. In a world of slavery where normal interaction among slaves is threatened by injustice, cruelty and discrimination Douglass’ autobiography take a stance and resists the hegemony and eventually stimulates on its constitutional abolishment. It offers a positive vision for life. Frederick Douglass’ autobiography speaks about two worlds: One which is full of cruelty, injustice and violence; and another is the resistance in the forms of protest, question, disobey and attempt to subvert the former. The ultimate goal of slavery was to make human a property and to annihilate his / her sense of self-esteem for economic profit. Douglass’ autobiography can be read as resistance to that goal and resilience thereafter.

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