

FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S NARRATIVE: AN ACCOUNT OF THE SLAVE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Fredrick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself stood apart as a piece of writing in English literature which laid bare to the reader the psychosomatic perspective of the institution of slavery. It gave a first-hand account of this exploitative and degenerative system that reduced humans to animals and denied them something as simple as familial bonds. This paper attempted to look at this memoir to examine how Douglass through his Narrative chose to look back at his experience of slavery, succeeded in generalizing his experience for all black slaves and underlined its impact on the psyche, while at the same time maintained a recounting devoid of emotional excesses.

KEYWORDS: *Slavery, Silence, Powerlessness, Power, Black*

INTRODUCTION

"I received the tidings of [my mother's] death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger." (Douglass 13) (1997)

The above quoted sentence from the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself by Frederick Douglass (1997) pertinently bares to the reader the crux of slavery as an institution. Douglass's Narrative, by a nuanced handling of the subject, divulges a critical insight of the institution, understanding it from a psychological perspective. Douglass ensues by narrating his own experience, then proceeds by generalising it as the experience of all slaves, thus using his personal experience (which is generally what an autobiography deals with) to provide an account of the dehumanising system itself. Lisa Yun Lee (1991) sees him as the "voyeur" (Lee 52) or the "passive onlooker" (Lee 52) who reveals the reality of slavery through his "acts of looking" (Lee 52).

Douglass explicates to the readers the moment of his initiation into the institution of slavery, which essentially is the moment he grows conscious of his position as a slave and attains a deeper understanding of his predicament. This happens when he witnesses the whipping of Aunt Hester by his master, thus gaining a true recognition of his powerlessness. His inability to stop the whippings due to a concern for his own safety makes him a participant in that violence which he detests. Douglass (1997), here, through a particular incident in his life, succeeds in illustrating how slavery manifests a control not only on the body of the slave, but also on the mind. Moreover, there is a dichotomy which comes into play here; between his free self which does not have a physical manifestation in the body, and his abused body as the body of a slave.

Douglass (1997), through his Narrative, attempts to underline the strategies of attaining power, control and domination, which enable the white master to sustain the practice of slavery. An important instance of this in the text is Douglass's (1997) account of the common practice of separating the slave children from their mothers at a very young age:

“For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection towards his mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child” (Douglass 13) (1997). This is an effective scheme of making these slaves vulnerable and hence attaining control over their mind and body. Douglass (1997), further, repeatedly informs us about the gaps in his knowledge, through his account of the absent mother and unidentified father, which places him on the margins yet again. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s (1975) infamous statement, which equated knowledge with power, it is not surprising how the absence of any concrete piece of information regarding their existence distances these slaves from their own selves.

According to Lisa Yun Lee (1991), while addressing the issue of slavery, Douglass also asserts the universal issue of powerlessness from the “social appropriation of discourse” (51). Lee (1991) sees language as a tool of power in slave society, which “enslaves people who are outside of and prevented to learn the dominant language” (51). The first half of the text focuses on experiences of others, rather than Douglass himself. Thus, we see an ‘absence’ of Douglass in this part of the narrative. His ‘silence’ can be understood as symptomatic of the silences of the numerous slaves who suffered everyday at hands of their inhuman masters, yet never found a voice. Douglass only becomes more central in the narrative when he acquires language which becomes his instrument for achieving social equality. Lee (1991), further notes a power shift in the narrative at this point: “the descriptions of Douglass speaking and appropriating the language, are simultaneously accompanied by descriptions of slave masters watching silently” (56). There are silences in this part of the narrative too, but these are “purposeful silences” (Lee 56) (like Douglass’s decision of singling or not singing), and are not the “helpless silences” (Lee 56) of the first half.

It also becomes significant to examine, here, the language used by Douglass (1997) to reveal his slave experiences, which functions majorly to determine the reception of the text as a genuine account of the slave system. Douglass (1997) frequently uses the experiences of other slaves to make his argument on the issue of slavery. This technique serves the function of not only generalising the experience of all slaves, as has already been pointed out earlier, but also to establish the validity of his own experience, to affirm its authenticity. Further, an important feature of the text is the absence of emotional excesses in depicting the plight of the slaves and the avoidance of any attempt to sensationalize the brutal experiences. The incessant depiction of the slave masters as deceitful and fraudulent, places them at an opposition to Douglass himself who emerges as the sole being who can declare the truth (through his Narrative). There is, also, an attempt on Douglass’s (1997) part to appeal to his audience by demonstrating his knowledge of the Bible, using idioms from the Bible, to portray himself as “a faithful suffering Christian” (Matlack 18) (1979), which James Matlack (1979) views as a “careful strategy to expose the sham piety of slave masters, best exemplified in the Sunday School episode” (18). Matlack (1979) further notes the Appendix of the text as serving an identical function: “The Appendix counters the view that Douglass was too critical of religion. Such an impression would gravely damage the effectiveness of his work” (18)

The dichotomy of the free self and the abused body that has been stated earlier in this essay leads one to consider the two outlooks to Douglass that arise in the text. Douglass (1997) attempts to stand for every black man in the Narrative, yet his powerful presence and calm and sophisticated narration makes him different from those whom he attempts to represent. According to Donald B. Gibson (1985), “The personality of the narrator seeks a larger role than the public purpose of the book can allow” (551). The very detail that he did not completely understand the slave song indicates a difference between him and slavery. This duality can be interpreted as a fracturing of the self, yet it cannot be ignored that it is this very specific quality of Douglass, of being dissimilar yet similar, that permits him the authorship of this work.

While the very deed of taking upon himself the task of articulation of the slave experiences and the slave system as a whole, places Douglass (1997) in a position of defiance to the white masters by his affirmation of his freedom, yet Douglass (1997) takes care in his narrative to not offend the white readership, for, as Matlack puts it, Douglass was aware that “only the white majority had the number and power to make a difference on the issue of slavery” (18), and the very frame of the Narrative, with the two introduction letters and Douglass’s (1997) Appendix, serves to achieve this end.

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