



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

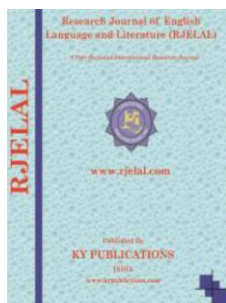
FREDERICK DOUGLASS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN LITERATURE

REINJAYA SITOANG^{1*}, ALIMIN PURBA²

Associate Professor, Darma Agung University
Medan, Indonesia

Email : sitohangrein@yahoo.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.155>



Frederick Douglas is one of Black American writers who has already given many contributions to American social life through American literature in the form of literary works. Most of his works talk about racial discrimination organized by the White skin toward Black skin. Generally, his works written were based on narrative form which take the main theme of his bitter life experience as a black. His works portray his own experience as the black skin who have already been treated badly as slaves as well as his heroic effort to improve his fate and profession from slave into a free man. In addition, his dedication on the life principles and the aim at getting freedom through abolitionists movement was extremely greeted and respected.

As seen from their contents, his works can be categorized as persuasive and propagandist writing that have a big influence in the history of American literature. In Douglass' opinion, slavery is the people's enemy which grows and develops. Frederick Douglass, therefore, states that he will not die as a slave. In order to omit slavery in the United States, he used his oration as a criticism to avoid any kinds of oppression and slavery in order that every people, man and woman, even children must have hope, free of speech, equality of right and participate in owning privileges and rights as the American people have.

Key words : racial discrimination, slavery, persuasive and propagandist writings, freedom.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Background of the Study

The dominant form of writing written by Black Southerners before 1865 was the slave narrative. Those accounts were mainly composed by the runaway bondsmen who had escaped to the North. These accounts, too, were published by abolitionist societies as examples of horrors of slavery as well as of the intense desire of the Black in the South to be free. The best known narrative

written by the black for the abolition movement was that of the remarkable Frederick Douglass.

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in 1818, at Tuckahoe, Maryland, of white father and a slave mother, and named Frederick Augustus Washington Balley. As a child, he learned to read and write skills that became for him both a figurative and literal pathway from slavery to freedom. Douglass escaped to the North in 1838 and used his astonishing oratorical powers to further the abolitionist cause. Then, in 1845, Douglass published

this account of his experiences as a slave, a work that was greeted with enthusiastic critical response and brought Douglass to the forefront of the antislavery movement. Then, the name of Frederick Douglass was taken after he successfully fled from slavery to New York and then Massachusetts in 1838. It was after his flight from Maryland to Massachusetts, he then possessed intellectual gifts owned by few other men.

Houston A. Baker, Jr (1982) in his introduction to the edition of *"Narrative of Life of Frederick Douglass"* discussed that slaves narratives as a distinct genre in American literature and points out that they were both contemporary political statements and consciously shaped autobiographies intended for posterity. Of the many eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives, Douglass' is clearly the preeminent example.

Frederick Douglass, who died in 1895 and have passed the mantle of leadership to Booker T. Washington, was the most famous of a number of Negroes active in the anti slavery movement in the period between David Walker's appeal and the civil War. In addition, like Martin R. Delany, Frederick Douglass was also an integrationist, a master reformer concerned with temperance and peace as well as woman's rights, perceived women as equal to men in the struggle, and emphasized in the importance of educating women in general and black women in particular (Harley,1974:31). It is also stated by Harley that, Frederick Douglass, who shared Delany's belief that women should share political rights equally with men, justified the education and cultural development of women for the good of society as a whole and felt strongly that a women has a right to the same intellectual cultures as man (32)

Furthermore, it is also stated by Harley that Frederick Douglass, who participated in the interracial association of men and women, editorialized that black man should become more involved in the struggle for woman's rights because of their common plight (34). According to Barksdale (1969 : 66), Frederick Douglass, who was the indispensable man in the event that culminated in freeing the young American nation of chattel

slavery, in the fight against slavery effectively countered the Garrisonian approach to abolitionism with its emphasis on moral persuasion and Northern succession and the political ineffectiveness of the constitution as a document of freedom. In his fight against slavery, he took a stand against colonization as a solution. In Douglass' view, physical separation from the white man would not benefit the black man; neither Black colonization nor any other kind of black separatism was to be preferred to integration of the Black man into the fabric of American society.

B. The Problems of the Study.

Hearing or seeing the phrase Afro-American, we immediately think of two people of different civilizations: one is being inferior while another one is superior, one is of black skin while another one is of white color, one is being poor while another one is so rich, one is being dependent while another one is free.

Based on the real condition above, the researchers would like to formulate the problems of the study as follows :

1. What are the efforts of the Black people to search for freedom, as well as civil rights in the historical context of the United States of America ?.
2. How are the African slaves being treated by their masters in the New World, America ?.

C. The Objectives of the Study

Referring to some ideas described in the background of the study, the objectives of finding out Frederick Douglass' contributions on African American social life are as follows :

1. To find out the efforts of the Black people to search for freedom, as well as civil rights in the historical context of the United States of America ?.
2. To find out how are the African slaves being treated by their masters in the New World, America ?.

D. The Theoretical Approach

As already stated in previous research article entitles *The Search For Self Identity in Bernard Malamud's The Assistant* published in *Sosiohumanika* 12 (2), Mei 1999 (Sitohang, et al, 1999 : 157) that this study will apply the American Studies approach which implement interdisciplinary approach. This approach requires the unity among the disciplines to get a better and deeper interpretation from the data provided as well as possible. In this study we, therefore, use the combination between Intrinsic and extrinsic theory especially historical, sociological, and biographical approach.

II. A SHORT HISTORY OF AFRO- AMERICAN SOCIETY

Historically, Africans has been brought to Jamestown as early as 1619. Their recruitment from the outside the colonies was closely related to the desire of cheap labor" to help lower the costs of producing tobacco, rice, indigo and other colonial staple crops"(Dinnerstein, 1979: 15). Some factors, including " the Navigation Acts, lower tobacco prices, and difficulties in obtaining additional indentured servants from England, combined to make the colonists, especially the owners of large plantations, favor importation of African workers.

Initially, Americans may have taken the idea of slavery from the Spanish when they occupied Middle America and established plantations. Because of the tropical climate, the white labor force was unable to work on these plantations, whereas the Indians, who were used to the heat of the sun, were employed forcibly. However, having previously led free lives the Indians naturally rebelled. There were many who died under this labor system. Finally, Bartolomo de la Cassas - a Roman Catholic priest, who was a defender of the Indians and their rights - suggested that blacks who were strong and suited to this climate, should replace the Indians.

Following this suggestion, then in about 1501, the Spaniards and other whites in America enslaved Blacks and imported them into America from Africa. Millions of Africans were transported into a repository of vast supplies of Blacks. From the

late fifteenth century to the mid nineteenth century, Europeans transported Africans from their homeland to fill the labor needs in North and South America. Consequently, slave trading activities intensified and increased enormously. There were 400,000 Africans sold to America each year during this period.

In America, the use of Negro slaves spread everywhere, even in the North. But in about 1800, the movement opposing slavery became stronger and slave trading was forbidden. In 1822, the majority of slaves were liberated by the fifth US President, James Monroe. In fact, cotton plantations were rapidly expanding in the South, which created great profits for some Southerners. Finally, Africans were imported again in large number to work on these plantations.

The first Negroes to be imported to the New World in the 1500s were not regarded as "slave" but as "servants" (Randal, 1973:57). They were brought to America to supply the labor force for plantations. Thus, the first Blacks in the colonies were regarded as human beings, and were not subjected to the cruelty and sadism of actual slavery.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, Blacks were brought almost exclusively into the Southern colonies, especially to North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Mississippi and Texas. They were needed there to work the cotton plantations. At the time, the South was primary cotton producer for Great Britain and North America.

Slave trader raced to capture and import Negroes without any consideration for humanitarian treatment or values. Slaves trading became a big business. In 1850, there were 50 dealers in Charlestown and 200 dealers in New Orleans (Garraty, 1981: 197). Slavery, originally based on an economic decision, became an economic institution and vested interest for each slave state.

Teaching a slave to read and write was strictly forbidden (Randal, 1973: 58). Negroes were to keep ignorant. If whites and Blacks found themselves worshipping in the same place, they sat

apart. Blacks even had to step off the sidewalk when whites wish to pass; gambling with whites or with other slaves was forbidden and slaves could not form secret societies (63). These restrictions made Blacks lag behind for many centuries and whites always felt that they could continue to enslave Negroes easily and without any serious challenge.

Generally, slaves lived unhappily, enduring the cruel and inhuman conditions imposed by their masters. They worked by force of the owners, and they were often beaten. The worst thing for them was to be sold off and separated from their families. On the other hand, not all whites treated Blacks badly, as Randal states: "Finding not merely injustice, oppression, brutality and heart-burning in the regime, but also gentleness, kindheartedness, friendship, and mutual loyalty" (63). There were some Negroes who could read and write at that time, like Frederick Douglass, and Phyllis Wheatley. This was of course, because some whites as well as their masters taught them.

Realizing that their fate would never change in the South, some slaves resisted and rebelled. At the beginning, their uprising was not so extreme. They only tried to escape from one home to another home, or to free Black relatives. Later, their opposition grew more extreme, they escaped from one state to another. Moreover, they resisted physically, killing or injuring their masters before running away.

The slave's resistance was supported not only by Blacks but it was also sustained by many Whites, especially from the North. Many Quakers in the North protected them and aided them through the use of the underground railroad and by giving them funds.

The United States was divided into two sections, South and North. The Southern states defended slavery, while the North insisted on abolishing it from the whole country. This conflict developed into war, which swallowed more than 600, 000 people; it was known as the American Civil War. Actually, there were many causes of the civil war, but many historians believe that slavery was one of the primary causes of the Civil War.

III. FREDERICK DOUGLASS' CONTRIBUTIONS THROUGH LITERARY WORKS

Rubin states that Frederick Douglass, who is now more important for his role in the development of the black literature, produced three autobiographies, among those: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1881 and enlarged in 1892. He also states that the earliest version is particularly graphic in its vivid picture of slave experience (1979: 184).

According to Warren (1973:1035), the second version of the autobiography remains one of the most vivid and readable of the works in that genre. He states too that although it is not the first autobiography written by an American slave, it was the first to make a general impact. It did so not only because of its intrinsic merit but because of its timing: feelings about slavery were now approaching a crisis. In the mean time, in Barkslade's opinion, the writing of Frederick Douglass, generally speaking, fall into three groups: the editorial essays written for his journals - *The North Star*, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, and *The Douglass' Monthly* - his speeches and orations; and his autobiographical writings (1969: 68).

Furthermore, according to Sterling Tuckey, in the *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*, he is said to have written a statement as follows: "I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell his birthday. They seldom came nearer to it than planting time, harvest time, cherry - time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood"(1987: 223).

Perkins then, states that *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was written by a man with a sharp memory for details, a good, plain style, thoroughly tested on the lecture platform, and vivid sense of importance of his story (1985: 721).

And the Quarles states that this Narrative was confined to slavery experience, and lent itself very well to abolitionist propoganda (1960 : xvi). He also states that the Narrative is absorbing in its

sensitive description of person and places, and marked its author as the personification not only of the struggle but of performance (1960: xviii). Further, he states that the Narrative is an American book in theme, in tone, and in spirit. It is even said that the Narrative swept Douglass into the stream or main stream of the antislavery movement, and is clear and passionate utterance both of the Negro's protest and of his aspiration (1960: xix).

A. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass as a work of Literature.

"*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*" is undoubtedly "one of the most influential pieces of reform propaganda in American literature" (Cohen, 1969: 90). It is considered as a landmark in American literary crusade against slavery. Cohen placed the work in the first rank among the nearly one hundred slave narratives of book length compass, just as its author took the foremost place among the Negro Americans who made a career of striking at slavery (ibid). Not only in its content does it attract and invite the confidence of its reader, but also in its literary style and literary effectiveness it convinces us that it is "a literary classic" as we will see presently.

To begin with, the Narrative invites the confidence of the critical reader by Douglass' avoidance of verbatim remarks from the lips of his cast of characters. Feeling that truth, he shunned the use of reconstructed dialogue, of contrived conversations, exchanges remembered word for word. Among the Narrative's special points of merit is its readability. Douglass writes in a simple and direct prose, free of literary allusions, and almost without quoted passages, other than a stanza from John Greenleaf Whittier, two lines from Hamlet, and one from William Cowper. The details are concrete, an element of style established in the opening lines, as follows:

"I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses

know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant.

I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom came nearer to it than planting – time, harvest – time, cherry – time, spring –time or fall-time" (Baker, 1982: 47).

Contributing to the literary effectiveness of the Narrative is its pathos. Douglass scorns pity, but his pages are evocative of sympathy, as he meant them to be. Deeply affecting is the paragraph on his mother, creating its mood with the opening sentence and heightening it with line:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of this times was very short duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise. ...she would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have had while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old. (48).

The Narrative is not given to flights of introspection, but it clearly reveals that its author had a reflective turn of mind. The sight of a fleet of Chesapeake Bay ships moving out to the open sea on a Sunday morning could provoke in the young slave a bitter apostrophe:

You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave. ...you are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly around the world; I am confined in bands of iron! ... The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery (106).

The Narrative is without humor or light touches. Its tone is steadily condemnatory, all roads

converging to this end. For example, Douglass presents a graphic description of the holiday week, from Christmas to New Year, in which the slaves indulged in sports and merriment. But he views these holidays as a gross fraud, attributing them not to the benevolence of the masters but solely to their effectiveness in dampening the spirit of rebellion. Similarly the Narrative hold that singing among the slaves was not an evidence of their contentment, but a major of their unhappiness. Perhaps the most moving passage in the volume, Douglass portrays these songs as furnishing a testimony against slavery and offering a prayer for deliverance. The mere recurrence of those songs, even now, afflicts me, ran one passage, and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek.

For all his criticism of the slaveholders and their hirelings, Douglass did not fail to take note of certain human weakness among the slaves themselves. Never given to avoiding unpleasant facts, a hallmark of his public career, Douglass tells of the quarrels between the slaves of Colonel Lloyd and those of Jacob Jepson:

Slaves are like other people, and imbibe prejudices quite common to others. They think their own better than that of others. Many, under the influence of this prejudice, think their own masters better than the masters of the other slaves. ...It was so on our plantation. When Colonel Lloyd's slaves met the slaves of Jacob Jepson, they seldom parted without a quarrel about their masters; Colonel Lloyd's slaves contending that he was the richest and Mr. Jepson's slaves contending that he was the smartest. These quarrels would almost always end in a fight ...The slaves seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves. It was considered as being bad enough to be a slave; but to be a poor man's slave was deemed a disgrace indeed! (112).

The literary qualities of the Narrative, combined with its strong line, confirm its literary excellence and merit. Hence, in theme, in emphasis, and in spirit, the Narrative is Literature. It reaffirmed

American's heritage of liberty by holding a mirror into its citizens and urging them to look at themselves, but not with rose – colored glasses. The manifesto of a typical American reformer, the Narrative voiced a creed of liberty that all who listened would find hard to deny.

B. Frederick Douglass as Negro Abolitionist of the 19th century

An exciting career began for Frederick Douglass. He became the most important Negro abolitionist of the nineteenth century. Abolitionists attacked slavery not just because it denied freedom to Negroes, but because it was directly opposed to all for which America stood.

Because of Frederick's intense interest in the abolitionist movement, he was present at church meetings wherever slavery was being discussed. Invitations were extended to him to visit other Massachusetts towns to listen to speeches by prominent white persons who were opposed to slavery. On August 11, 1841 Douglass made his first speech before an anti-slavery society.

For four years, under the sponsorship of William Lloyd Garrison an ardent white abolitionist and editor of famous newspaper, Douglass lectured in the North and East. Then from all parts of the country came the cry, "Send us Douglass." Soon he became one of the most outspoken and best known orators in the United States.

There were people who believed that Douglass was lying about his childhood, so his friends urged him to write about his experiences. Finally he wrote the Narrative of Douglass, which created a sensation throughout America. A copy of the book was read by the Auld family. They went to court and asked to have Douglass, who was their legal property, returned to them. Friends warned Frederick that if he did not leave the country he would surely be captured to his owner. The exciting laws made it unsafe for a runaway slave to live in a state even where slavery did not exist.

In 1845, he went to England where he remained for 2 years. There he met distinguished leaders, and spoke to large audiences about conditions in America. Friends begged him to send

for his family and settle in England. But Douglass knew that he was needed in America. In order that he might not be claimed upon his return to the United States, friends raised the money to purchase his freedom. Money was also set aside to buy a printing press so that he could start a newspaper.

When he returned, Douglass started a weekly paper in Rochester, New York. He called it the North Star. The Newspaper became the spokesman for the Negro race. It also helped educate the Negro in public affairs. For many years it was an important part of the fight against slavery.

When the Civil War began, Douglass urged President Lincoln to recruit Negro soldiers. Douglass urged every Negro " to get an eagle on his button, a musket on his shoulder, and the star spangled Banner over his head". He said, "Who would be free themselves must strike the first blow". Among the first Negro men to join the Northern army were Douglass' two sons, Lewis and Charles. Thousands of other Negroes did, too.

After the war, Douglass' work was not finished, Civil rights became the new issue after the Emancipation Proclamation. From then on, Douglass devoted himself to the cause of civil rights. He was one of the first to see that woman's suffrage and free Negro citizenship involved some of the same democratic issues and principles. He joined with some of the famous women of the day to see that these things were brought about.

Honors were eventually bestowed upon Douglass by the country that he was so nobly served and so deeply loved. He was appointed to many important positions in government by the five presidents who followed Lincoln.

Douglass lived for more than 30 years after the death of Abraham Lincoln. He had been a friend and adviser to the President. On the occasion of Lincoln's second inaugural ball, Douglass went to the White House to congratulate the President. Guards at the front door would not let him in because he was a Negro. Douglass was enraged, and demanded and then Lincoln was told that he was there. Word quickly came back from the President requesting that Douglass be admitted immediately. Spotting

Douglass, Lincoln shouted greetings to his friend and rushed through the crowd to shake his hand! Many of the guests were surprised; some were even indignant.

In 1876, Douglass made a speech at the unveiling of a monument built in memory of Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C. The monument has an interesting origin. Charlotte Scott, an ex-slave, on hearing of Lincoln's assassination, gave \$ 5.00 of her wages toward the building of a monument to his memory. The idea spread rapidly. Negroes raised over 16 thousand dollar. Three quarters of the sum came from Negro soldiers. The date set for the unveiling was April 14th, the anniversary of Lincoln's assassination and the emancipation of the slaves in the District of Columbia.

At the ceremony, Douglass spoke impressively, "We stand at the national center to perform something like a national act Though the union was more dear to him than our freedom or our future, under his wise and beneficent rule we saw ourselves gradually lifted from the depths of slavery to the heights of liberty and manhood"

To Douglass, slavery was an enemy of man's growth and development. Because of its physical and social handicaps, Frederick resolved that he would not die a slave. Until his death, on February 15, 1895, Frederick Douglass fought for freedom. He used his oratorical gifts to help overthrow the whole system of slavery so that men, women, and children might have hope, freedom of expression, and an equal opportunity to participate in the privileges, and to assume the responsibilities, of American citizenship.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Having analyzed Frederick Douglass' contributions to American literature through his own "Narrative", now we come to the conclusion that the Narrative was written as the effect of his bitter experience confronting the Black Slaves. The Narrative reveals a common pattern of representation consisting of the narrator's experiences in slavery, his heroic journey from slavery to freedom, and his subsequent dedication to abolitionist principle and goals.

1. His narrative contains with many affecting incidents, many passages of great eloquence and power. The most thrilling one of them all is the description Douglass gives of his feelings, as he stood soliloquizing respecting his fate, and the chances of his one day being a freeman.
2. In general, his narrative portrays the good tame of the master toward slave, and the master's will to free the slave as well as human's right, freedom, and fraternity. From this description, we can conclude that this narrative is a kind of persuasive writing. It is also improved by Henning Cohen that states that, *the Narrative of the life of. Frederick Douglass* is "one of the most influential pieces of reform propaganda in American literature" (1969: 90).
3. To Douglass, slavery was an enemy of man's growth and development. Because of its physical and social handicaps, Frederick resolved that he would not die a slave. Until his death, on February, 15, 1895, Frederick Douglass fought for freedom. He used his oratorical gifts to help overthrow the whole system of slavery so that men, women, and children, might have hope, freedom of expression, an equal opportunity to participate in the privileges, and to assume the responsibilities of American citizenship.
4. The experience of Frederick Douglass as a slave, was not a peculiar one and his fate was not especially a hard one, his case may be regarded as a very fair specimen of the treatment of slaves in Maryland, in which state it is confessed that they are better fed and less cruelly than in Georgia, Alabama or Louisiana.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cohen, Henning, *Landmarks of American Writing*, New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publisher, 1969.
- Dinnerstein, Leonard, et al. *Natives and Strangers: Ethnic Groups and The Building of America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Garraty, John A, *A Short History of The American Nation*, New York: Harper & Row, 1989.
- George Perkins, *The American Tradition In Literature*, New York: Random House, 1956.
- Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, USA: Viking Penguin, Inc, 1982
- Louis Rubin, *The Literary South*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1979.
- Quarless, Benjamin (Ed.) *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.
- Randal, J. G. et al. *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, Massachusetts: Heath and Company, 1973.
- Richard, Barkslade, *Black Writers of America, A Comprehensive Anthology*, New York: The Macmillan Co, 1969.
- Sitohang, Reinjaya, et al. *Sosiohumanika : Majalah Berkala Parcasarjana*, 12 (2), Yogyakarta :Universitas Gadjah Mada, Mei 1999.
- Sharon, Harley, *The Afro-American Woman, Struggles and Images*, National University Publications, Kennikat Press 1974.
- Sterling Tuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Stratton, Madeline Robinson, *Negroes Who helped Build America*, Boston: Ginn and Company, 1965.