



Frederick Douglass: A Crusader of Human Rights from Afro-American World

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Abstract

The present research paper aims at bringing before the readers the mammoth contribution made by Frederick Douglass who had experienced the pangs of slavery in white dominated American society and later on freeing himself from the shackles of slavery became a social activist for getting the erstwhile slaves their social rights by waging a war against the institution of slavery. It was because of such luminaries' contribution that America could awake from deep slumber of its degraded history where slavery and accredited or institutionalised system of it sustained for over four hundred years. In the present research paper, the researcher will try to put forth the efforts made by Frederick Douglass and other social crusaders like him who contributed to creating a new golden era of equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their culture, race, language etc.

Key words: slavery, racial, discrimination, civil rights, crusade, human rights.

"America, it is to thee,
Thou boasted land of liberty,
It is to thee I raise my song,
Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong"¹

These words of James M. Whitefield, an abolitionist activist in America, expressed in his 'America and Other Poems' (1853) paint a grim picture of the place of Afro-Americans in America who were forcefully brought to the shores of New Land. It did offer to them the very bottom of social ladder. The schism between white plant owners and their slaves was very prevalent and apparent. The feeling of being human and treating others too as human beings was yet to be sprouted among the plantation owners who were white colonizers only. The Afro-Americans were not treated with respect and dignity. The human trade was very common and nobody associated it with the violation of human rights. The whites through various legislatures and

stringent implementation of the same had created such a system where their 'slaves' were none the less than 'commodity'. There were auctions of humans labelled as 'slaves' and buying and selling was very normal practice. This situation in the USA continued for many years uninterrupted. It was only after some voices from within the Afro-American world raised that the plantation owners were compelled to grant some facilities and liberty to a very limited extent. The common tendency and social behaviour towards Afro-Americans were no way different over many next years. This so called 'system of slavery' got jolts with the emergence of Frederick Douglass and his other companies who not only initiated struggle for rights but also galvanised both Black and white societies against this inhuman system.

It is a fact that the system of slavery already existed in many of African regions even before the whites reached the shores of African world with a

purpose of trade and commerce with the local kings. But the slaves were nothing but laborers with their own choice of work, owner etc. They were not even bonded labourers. It makes us crystal clear that the word 'system of slavery' was equivalent with only a 'section of labourers'. There was no any derogatory attachment with it which would strip them of their identity and push them to the lower ladder of social complex. The word got its rigorous and inferiority-laced meaning only in America when the plantation owners or traders bought the Africans in America and started exploiting them. Now, they were no more humans but just an entity, commodity or property which belonged to some or the other especially a white. In the beginning 'African slaves were carried to Portugal and other parts of Europe for domestic work. In some cases, they were also used as farm laborers'².

As the white greed for economy boosting grew at faster pace, the cheap labor in form of Africans was an easy option for them. This section proved to be handy prey and vulnerable to raise voice against this 'development' in the New World. The improved economic condition of plantation boosted their confidence to perpetuate the system of slavery so that they could prosper in their livelihood. They felt the 'dire' need to make it permanent so that they could accumulate more and more wealth than others. The plantation settlements where these Africans were employed as labourers were no less than concentration camps for them. They were totally deprived of their African culture, identity, and human rights. This draconian lust for wealth on the part of the whites institutionalised slavery and further strengthened and consolidated it with enacting some or the other law. It was only late in the 19th century that it was vehemently challenged and abolished after a lot of collective efforts.

Racial discrimination born out of 'invasion' of white Europeans on America brought a massive upheaval in this New Land. The whites with their superiority complex looked at the 'others' through the prism of race. This escalated simmering tension between the natives and colonisers. The gruesome act of white Europeans after creating slavery and incorporating Afro-Americans into it for their own

goodness and purpose of trade to reap large benefits triggered shock waves across the peaceful continent. The racial discrimination was a direct result of race-rift among the whites and Blacks. The already big gap between these two races did not narrow with passage of time but widened more. The prevalence of whites in all the premier government bodies, agencies, institutions etc. consolidated their grip over the entire society. This hegemony was unintentionally used to sabotage Blacks or Afro-Americans. It resulted in social hierarchy of the whites and lower status of the Blacks. It relegated the Afro-Americans to the very bottom of social fabric pushing them to the last in American social order. The latter were stolen of all resources and powers be it social, political or cultural. The system of racial discrimination was so rigid and strong that we can see its reflection in the behaviour of white supremacists even today in some incidents in America. Though, it has been annihilated by law, some specks of it still can be seen in the minds of a few people from white American world who still believe in white supremacy. It has permanently damaged the social structure of the country and has posed an unprecedented challenge to bringing equality by law in the soil of America. We can observe that the factor of race which played a key role in determining the 'place' of Afro-Americans in American society for over four hundred years has significantly disturbed its social structure and has become a major hurdle in the process of delivering justice to all citizens.

Being born to a slave mother Harriet Bailey, Frederick Douglass had experienced the pangs of slavery since very beginning of his life. His father being a white man did never reveal the identity to claim for Frederick as his father. The name Frederick Washington Bailey christened by his mother evokes a commanding example of European, classical and American national patriarch and also gives him a sense of identity and self-worth.³ The life of slavery in the initial stages of life did not offer any solace. But as he grew up, he started understanding the hierarchical system and very seriously contemplating a way to his liberation. The first and foremost thing that one needs for salvation in this mortal world to be a free human being when he is

scuffed with the ropes of un moulding rules is no other than education. And to climb the ladder of freedom through education was possible for Douglass by learning the language of his master. Douglass well understood this fact and soon started learning the tongue of his white masters. This is well depicted in his autobiography which has an interesting episode of his growing friendship with Daniel Lloyd, Colonel Lloyd's youngest son. But unfortunately, on the part of Douglass, his master senses a danger in letting his slave (Frederick) take lessons of language and other subjects. At the household of the Aulds, Hugh Aulds warns his wife Sophia of the same danger asserting, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave...it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."⁴ Such acrimonious life incidents invigorated his belief that the only path to his liberty was education and education only. The abomination of his white masters did not douse his confidence but created in him a sense of self identity. His self-education helped him a lot. His description of harsh life in his autobiography- "We were worked in all seasons. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him and the shortest nights too long for him."⁵ well expresses anguish and pity towards himself as well as his white masters. Douglass's journey until he joined the abolitionist movement was filled with such thorns. It was the dark period of Douglass's and other Afro-Americans lives who had to undergo unequal, heinous, discriminatory, humiliating and undignified life conditions fostered by the whites.

After his escape from the slavery, Douglass went on a tour to England to be a part of abolitionist movement. The intellectuals of the country were against the institution and system of slavery which was in practice in America. After returning back to the USA, he also wanted to start his own newspaper

to address the issues of Afro-Americans and voice against the inhuman system of slavery. He did not halt his journey unto his last death even though he had to jeopardise his own life. He was convinced that through struggle and agitation, the Blacks or Afro-Americans could get their rights back. The complex of inferiority and superiority was not an easy task to wipe it out completely. Even in modern America, we can witness some incidents of Black-white racial conflicts tough less or negligible in number. As a seasoned intellectual and activist Frederick Douglass took up the cause of abolition of slavery and became a crusader of human rights and waged a war against anti-nature system of slavery. His courage and movement saw no political boundaries of the cities and proliferated across the South and the North. It was because of the efforts of Douglass and other social luminaries who themselves had gone through the bitter ordeal in lives that the slavery was abolished by law in the late 19th century in the USA. W. E. B. DuBois writes about the psychological status of Afro-America in the words- "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife: to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in the flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American."⁶

American history is not a plain meadow to go, sit and study the land with its simplicity. It has a very complex phenomena hidden within itself. If we flip through the pages of the past chapters of American life with an analytical mind, we certainly come across many evidential incidents where human and civil rights of citizens or people living in the land called 'America' seem to have been crushed mercilessly with an intention. The citadel of progress of today's America certainly stands to a certain extent on the foundation of efforts of the Afro-Americans and their tireless efforts. The slavery and racial discrimination had gripped the entire country into a vortex of social stratification. The Afro-Americans who actually experienced the

discriminatory system can not be perceived by us so easily. The relentless and socially conscious movements initiated and led by social luminaries like Frederick Douglass bore fruits. It was the spirit of these people that kept alive the hope for better tomorrow in the hearts of millions of slaves. The words of Douglass are very evident in this regard when he admits- "I had reached the point, at which I was not afraid to die. This spirit made me a freeman in fact, while I remained a slave in fore." With a positive affirmation he proclaims, "I was nothing before. I WAS A MAN NOW"⁷.

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