

## **Persecution and Resilience in Narrative of life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper dwells around the themes of Persecution and Resilience in the autobiographical novel by Frederick Douglass, a world known Abolitionist and Orator who fought against slavery and torture done to African-American Blacks by white men. Douglass influenced people by his other autobiographies too, but this one traces his journey from a Born Slave to an Orator reflecting the hardships and struggle faced by him. Autobiography is perfect example of persecution and human resilience which shows how Douglass managed to be victorious in spite of the inhuman treatment done to him. Persecution is present in novel from the very start and all slaves are shown suffering but resilience can be traced only through Douglass. The act of never bowing down in front of circumstances and achieving liberty is explained. In this paper we will not only trace the torture done to slaves but Resilience of Douglass will be our focus too. The journey from born slave to an abolitionist is itself an example of Human resilience.

**Keywords:** Orator, Abolitionist, Persecution, Human Resilience, Liberty, Autobiography.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The autobiographical novel was written by Frederick Douglass in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1845 and is known as best known slave narrative. The fondness of novel can be traced by instance that “**Within 4 months of publication in 1845 five thousand copies were sold**”(Matlack 1). After this novel Douglass became a well known face in world of anti-slavery movement. This novel includes the description of Douglass's birth, how he grew up and struggled through slavery, got educated by himself and finally his escape from slavery and turning to world known Orator. The memoir expresses the persecution, sufferings, whippings, deaths and pain of slaves. Douglass was in dire straits from the very start, being a born-slave life of Douglass

was no more less than a roller coaster ride. He experienced the sufferings and struggle and lived his major life as an orphan but God has been kind to him when he was given some opportunities, Douglass wisely availed those chances and got what he carved for.

## 2. THEME OF PERSECUTION

In the memoir the underlying theme that runs all across is of Persecution but Resilience is something that runs within the Douglass. With every brutality done to him, he used it as an opportunity to learn and fulfill his wish without bouncing back. In the novel Oppression, Sufferings and ill-treatment was faced by every slave. As the novel opens, the account of hostility is provided by Douglass, narrating event of his birth which in no time led to separation with his mother, Harriet Bailey. Being Unknown of the factual details of their birth and oblivious of who their father was condition of every born slave there. Merciless was the law that ensures that baby delivered by Slave women who were raped by their white masters will become slaves like their mothers. Douglass's suffering can be traced from the incident when his mother died; he was only seven years old but was not allowed to attend his mother's funeral. But the actual introduction of persecution to Douglass happened when he witnessed his Aunt Hester's whipping because she was out on a night with Ned Roberts but his master denied doing so as he was interested in Hester. She was brutally whipped and stripped.

Douglass witnessed this inhuman treatment for the very first time and he was terrified. He said **"I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next"** (Douglass 7, 8). Slaves were treated just like animals and were provided linen shirts and very less food and no bed to sleep. They were often whipped, groaned and cursed. Slave trading and trafficking also happened. When Colonel Lloyd randomly asked a slave about his master and he denied of being treated well, he was chained and sold to Georgia as punishment. The sense of fear and trembling can be expressed through the incident of a Slave named Demby, who was whipped by Mr. Austin Gore, the overseer of Great House Farm. Out of fear he hid into a creek, Mr. Gore started a countdown to three in order to get him back but Demby made no response for that he was shot dead.

Everyone on plantation was shocked. In other Incident where Mr. Thomas Lanman killed his two slaves by using a hatchet and laughed by describing how they

should be relieved from blacks. Incident of Mrs. Hicks who killed a slave who was a girl in her teenage by brutally breaking her nose and breastbone was mentioned by Douglass. These incidents reflect that killing Slaves was not treated as brutality or crime. As Douglass said **“I speak advisedly when I say this,—that killing a slave, or any colored person, in Talbot county, Maryland, is not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community”**(Douglass,24).When Douglass was shifted to Baltimore with Auld’s from Lloyd’s Plantation he observed an all together different life. All the slaves were in good condition except the neighbors residing opposite to them. Mrs. Hamilton was very cruel and uses to mistreat her slaves Henrietta and Mary by often groaning and yelling at them. But Baltimore proved be a promising place for Douglass, his new mistress Mrs. Sophia Auld who was having her very first experience of holding a slave started educating him and made him learn spellings and words.

But this all didn’t last long when noticed y Mr. Auld he stopped his wife and said **“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 so. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world”** (Douglass, 33).This statement of Mr. Auld hit Douglass hard and he figured out how and why the blacks were stopped from getting education. After death of Captain Anthony division of livestock and slaves started among his three children. Persecution can roughly be traced from instance that slaves were considered just as animals. Luckily, Douglass came under division of Mrs. Lucretia and was sent back to Baltimore but soon she died and he was further rented to Edward covey, a cruel man known as **“nigger breaker”** (Douglass, 57). Factual details provided by Douglass explains that he came on Covey’s farm on Jan1, 1833 and he was forced to do extreme work in a field of guiding team of unbroken oxen who not only made Douglass run across the woods but he merely escaped his head banging in from trees. Oxen again rushed and crushed the bullock into pieces just few inches from him. Douglass said, **“Thus twice, in one short day, I escaped death by the merest chance”** (Douglass, 59).

Mr. Covey used to do long prayers in morning and night and appeared more devotional and kind than he actually was. In order to produce slaves for plantation he never committed the sin to rape anyone as he was a religious person, Instead he hired a man to sleep with a slave name Caroline, whom he bought for breeding purposes. Result came in last of year when she gave birth to twins and increased number of

born-slaves. As Covey was in habit on sneaking upon slaves and getting maximum work, Douglass explained how he had to work in all weathers. Douglass lost hope and thought of ending his life several times, He considered himself as full of fear, broken and totally lost. But soon an Incident changed Douglass view and filled him with zeal and power. One day while working in fields, Douglass collapsed from fatigue and Covey hit him hard with plank and blood oozed from Douglass's head.

Even On complaining to Thomas Auld nothing happened. On a Monday morning, in the stable Covey attempted tying Douglass's legs with a rope and Douglass decided to fight back. He seized Covey by his throat, kicked him hard and snatched him on the ground. After two hours of fight, Covey was so terrified by the incident that he never touched Douglass again. When Douglass along with his friends made plan to escape, they were put behind bars as one of them has leaked the plan. After some time, When Douglass was again sent to Baltimore he learnt the trade of ship caulking under William Gardener. The persecution he faced there was totally racial, white carpenters strike against blacks in order to discharge them and hire only white men. Douglass was a traded slave so he continued to work. Humiliation and ill-treatment that Douglass undergone was not less, one day four white apprentices attacked Douglass and kicked in his left eye. Blood poured out of his face. Douglass recalled them saying, **"Kill the damned nigger! Kill him! Kill him! He struck a white person"** (Douglass,96).

Douglass informed about this all to Thomas Auld and he took him to lawyer, Esquire Watson. But Watson's answer is itself a testimony to humiliation and persecution of slaves as he said that no warrant can be issued on Douglass's word unless some white men testify. To this Douglass said, **"If I had been killed in the presence of a thousand colored people, their testimony combined would have been insufficient to have arrested one of the murderers"** (Douglass, 97). The statement of Douglass is itself enough to show the discrimination and torture done on the racial behalf. Treatment of slaves as mere animals can be traced through events of whipping, lashing and killing itself. Persecution is nerve of slavery for white man. Ill treatments and hostility done to blacks and trading them was like a daily basis process. But Douglass never bowed down in front it and devoted his life to the fighting against discrimination with blacks and slavery.

### 3. THEME OF RESILIENCE

Resilience is the capacity to face difficulties and recovering from them without kneeling down. As per “Merriam Webster Dictionary, Resilience is the ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens and **the** ability of something to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, pressed, bent etc.”(Webster). Frederick Douglass is worth mentioning here, In terms of resilience he was the only slave who undergone everything and never knelled in front of situations. He not only recovers from the trauma but also fought for others. From the very start he was very much attracted to joy and sadness filled songs of slaves passing by, though he was not able to understand them but can connect to the tone that was a kind of testimony against slavery. Douglass many time recovered from incidents of being beaten up and smashed with planks etc. But one thing that made him hold on and fight against circumstances with recovering back was his utter craving for escape and his love towards education. When Sophia Auld started teaching him and her husband stops him from doing so, he understood his way to escape. Douglass said **“From that moment I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (Douglass, 33).**

Douglass confirmed in the novel that his relocation to Baltimore made the greatest change in his life, as Sophia Auld stopped teaching him; he befriended some little white poor boys and use to brought white bread from them after work in order to get some learning from them. Reading “The Columbian Orator” also proved to be a life changing experience for Douglass after that he never looked back. He uses to work along with learning. He left no chance to learn and availed all possibilities, whether it be writing across city on walls, ground and fence or it be using discarded copies of little Auld. After struggling hard and learning the trade of ship caulking along with undergoing beatings from white men, Douglass made sufficient money to escape. Though account of his escape is not mentioned intentionally as it would restrict other slaves, but Douglass escaped from Baltimore and reached New York on September 3. He met abolitionist and Journalist David Ruggles who advised his to escape to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

He married his free black beloved Anna Murray and changes his name to “Douglass”. In 1841 on 11<sup>th</sup> August, he attended an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket and spoke in front of many white and black people. From there Douglass worked for the cause of slavery, after sometime he became an orator and then

established himself as an abolitionist. Resilience is a part of human nature, but the adaptation to adversities takes a great effort and understanding, how without kneeling down in front of situation we can find a way out is where actual resilience lies. Fighting and recovering by not bouncing back is not everyone's cup of tea. Qualities of focusing and not resisting back while handling adversities sets Douglass apart from others. His life is itself a great example of Human Resilience.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Novel is a treatise on slavery, Persecution and slavery are intertwined. Every slave narrative in this world witness hostility, inhuman treatment and pain. Major slave narrative shows the differentiation done on racial basis, so was the case of Frederick Douglass. Resilience lies in every human being and even animals but while suffering everyone is not able to develop the way of dealing with adversities. Douglass has faced Persecution I first half of his life as he was born into slavery but the decision to not die as a slave and having resilience to achieve best made Douglass a world known personality and his autobiographies received a lot of love while changing lives of many. Till his death Douglass worked for abolition of slavery and played the main role during American civil war in order to get slavery abolished and set millions of slaves free.

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