

Autobiographical Writing as a Site of Appropriating Cosmopolitan Culture: A Study of Frederick Douglass' Autobiographies*

Prakash Kumar Meher

Abstract

The present paper is an endeavour to uncover the cosmopolitan identity of Frederick Douglass' post-slavery lives vis-à-vis his two autobiographies: *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. After his escape from horrific enslavement of slavery, Douglass toured many cities in Europe and America. The proposed paper will deal with his transformation from being a fugitive slave to "cultured cosmopolitan" (Salinious 152). Douglass' European journey moulded his ideology and personality to be a proponent of equality through untiring efforts in his homeland. Douglass appreciates the European culture where he sensed freedom as a black American unlike his own country. His two autobiographies reflect this cosmopolitan culture in a conspicuous manner. The powerful effect of this culture on the authorial mindset of the autobiographer would be a key area to be explored in the paper. Further, the paper seeks to closely examine the corrective discourse offered by the writer through the genre of autobiography.

Keywords: Autobiography; Cosmopolitan Culture; Cosmopolitanism.

Introduction

The term 'cosmopolitan' has its origin in Greek words like *cosmos* and *polis*, where the former means "whole world" and the latter refers to "the label of a political community" (Strath 72). However, the idea of cosmopolitanism is first seen when Greek philosopher Diogenes stated "I am cosmopolitan!" (qtd. in Beros 198). Georg Cavallar views 'cosmopoli-

*This is the revised version of the paper presented at the XXI International Conference on *Revisiting Cosmopolitanism*, jointly organized by Forum on Contemporary Theory (FCT), Baroda, and International Lincoln Center for American Studies, Louisiana State University, Shreveport, USA, held from 18 to 21 December 2018.

tanism' as, "the belief or the theory that all humans, regardless of race, gender, religion or political affiliation belong to, or should belong to, one single community" (4). It speaks of any community where we do not find discrimination on the basis of caste, race or religion and thus puts emphasis on human beings as the citizens of the world. Further, Cavallar's standpoint emphasizes strongly about the value of cultural diversity. When we think about this particular belief or theory the Sanskrit phrase "Vasudhiva Kutumbakam" comes into play. This phrase consists of three words namely 'vasudha,' which means earth; 'Iva,' means is; and 'kutumbakam' signifies the family. In this way the phrase means the world is one family (Lakhanpal). The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word 'cosmopolitan' as "a person who has lived in and knows about many different parts of the world." Furthermore, Sirpa Salenius thinks this concept in a specified way by including identity, mobility and relocation as the prime factors which constitute cosmopolitanism. According to her it is "reassessment of identity associated with mobility and relocation;" which find its association in "intellectuality and universal humanism, in opposition to regional particularism or nationalism" (153). In view of these premises this paper attempts to uncover the cosmopolitan identity of Frederick Douglass vis-à-vis his two autobiographies: *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, later known as Frederick Douglass was an African-American writer and former slave. He escaped from the horrific clutches of slavery in 1838 and thereafter he transformed his life from fugitive slave to abolitionist, social activist and a "cultured cosmopolitan" (Salenius 152) propagating the cosmopolitan culture of Europe. The constant relocation of the autobiographer, i.e., from United States to Europe and vice-versa, eventually formed his identity of a pro-cosmopolitan. After his escape from slavery Douglass toured many European countries. However, before landing in Europe he was unaware about the absence of discrimination on the basis of color in European countries. The moment he landed in Ireland, he experienced the difference between being fugitive slave and a freeman.

In a letter addressed to prominent American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison in January, 1846 Douglass appreciates the European culture of equality and says that, "I can truly say, I have spent some of the happiest moments of my life since landing in this country" (Douglass *My Bondage* 296). He further describes the joyful moments in the context of equality where he witnesses sympathy for slave and hatred for slave holders; a warm embrace from members and ministers of religious bodies; and

kind hospitality offered by dignitaries (296). His admiration for culture of equality continues in the letter as he says that, "I find no difficulty here in obtaining admission into any place of worship, instruction, or amusement, on equal terms with people as white as any I ever saw in the United States" (297). It becomes evident that his experience of altogether different worldview is developed through his social contact in a different cultural locale. Notwithstanding being still a fugitive slave Douglass not only observed human brotherhood which is a prime aspect of cosmopolitanism, but also his acquaintance with many dignitaries made him as "cultured cosmopolitan" (Salenius152).

Douglass' tour of Ireland

The autobiographer's development from fugitive slave to "cultured cosmopolitan" is portrayed in his autobiographies as Douglass was treated equal with many dignitaries in Europe. He affirms himself as "refuge in monarchical England" and "rude, uncultivated fugitive slave" (Douglass *Life and Times*) as he escapes from slavery and takes shelter in Europe. However, some series of events and acquaintances modify the impertinence and uncultivated nature and makes him a greatly admired figure. Douglass' notion of cosmopolitanism is revealed by his association with leader of Ireland like Daniel O'Connell. He was invited by O'Connell who was famously known as "The Liberator." Douglass was deeply moved and influenced by his eloquence in addressing people for a cause who fought the battle for Catholic emancipation in Ireland. Like Douglass, O'Connell denounced the slavery and for this Douglass called him as, "the friend of liberty" (Douglass *Life and Times*). The meeting between both strengthened the cause of black rights across the globe, as Douglass was introduced as "Black O'Connell of US" by O'Connell in Conciliation Hall before a large audience. The notion of going beyond the boundary was reflected in the Irish leader's ideology. The autobiographer brings forth this and writes about his speech thus:

My sympathy is not confined to the narrow limits of my own green Ireland; my spirit walks abroad upon sea and land, and wherever there is oppression I hate the oppressor, and wherever the tyrant rears his head I will deal my bolts upon it, and wherever there is sorrow and suffering, there is my spirit to succor and relieve. (Douglass *Life and Times*)

The vision of the Irish leader is evident from this speech that he thinks beyond his territory and ready to fight for black people and humanity

which reinforce the cultured cosmopolitan thought. Further, he points out that any kind of oppression is a threat to pursue cosmopolitan culture and thereby strongly condemns the oppressor. The autobiographer was impressed by this and called him a "transatlantic statesman" (Douglass *Life and Times*) as his speech manifested the ability to sense discrimination beyond one country. During his sojourn in Ireland Douglass continued to experience the racial equality as he found himself dining with lord mayor of Dublin. He appreciates equality of the country and writes, "They measure and esteem men according to their moral and intellectual worth, and not according to the color of their skin" (Douglass *My Bondage* 298).

The most striking element in the autobiographical narratives is Douglass' experience of two cultures in different continents: One inside U.S.A. as a victim of slavery and another, regarding the fair treatment to black people in Europe. Moreover, the fair treatment to black people is clearly evident when he writes that, "a total absence of all manifestation of prejudice against me, on account of my color" (qtd. in Ferreira 57). The significant part of this culture in Europe and particularly in Ireland transfigures his cause of equality in his homeland in the later life. Apart from Ireland chapter of the fugitive slave's history, other European country like England too serves to mould him in pursuit of becoming a "cultured cosmopolitan" (Salenius 152).

Douglass' tour of Ireland marks the beginning of a change in the selfhood of the former slave. The shift from an oppressed self in America to a respectable figure in Ireland speaks volumes about the equality in Ireland as experienced by the autobiographer. The complete absence of racial discrimination points towards the fact that human race is one and there is no hierarchy of races. He observes that no race is superior to another unlike in America. This happens to be a valuable experience to the former slave which gets reflected in his actions and behaviors in the years to come. The Ireland chapter seems to be a stepping stone in the cause of being a promoter of multiculturalism.

Douglass' sojourn in England

Douglass is known for his speeches as far as promoting black rights and equality are concerned. We do find the efforts and vision of him in uniting the people and to bring under one umbrella. This is seen in his sojourn in England where he used to address several meetings to put forth the issue. His speeches serve as a means to reinforce his ideology of belief in cosmopolitanism. His untiring efforts to abolish slavery outside his homeland

and to establish cosmopolitan values are reflected in his Reception speech at Finsbury Chapel, Moorfields, England on May 12, 1846. He makes clear about raising the slavery issue outside America, i.e., in England before the British audience and goes beyond boundary when he says, "Slavery is the common enemy of mankind and all mankind should be made acquainted with its abominable character" (Douglass *My Bondage* 339).

He further says that, "He [slave] is a part of human family" (339-40). Douglass speaks of that family where there is no oppression. In one of his speeches he took his stance before the English people not against Americans; however, emphasized that slavery is a crime against all the members of human family. Thus he is able to connect and unite all against the evil practice which is a threat to cosmopolitanism and "regional particularism" (Salenius 153).

Being a victim of slavery, Douglass' prime motive behind raising the issue is to join pro-equality people in the crusade against the evil institution (slavery) and by joining them he advocates the common brotherhood. The life narratives offer his cosmopolitan acquaintance with John Bright and Richard Cobden as he calls them as "Rising statesmen of England" (Douglass *Life and Times*). He was invited as the welcome guest at the house of Mr. Bright. But he was treated as a friend and brother. Anti-Corn Law League was founded by both Bright and Cobden. They were known for fight against corn laws. The autobiographies provide glimpses of his observation of agitation in England vis-à-vis the corn laws and thus take interest on the social issue of England. He praises both Bright and Cobden for their efforts to repeal the law.

Furthermore, his autobiographies delineate about his association with dignitaries like Sir John Bowring, Thomas Clarkson, Mary Howitt and her husband William Howitt in England. Clarkson was an English abolitionist and leader of anti-slavery movement. Bowring was a poet, statesman and diplomat. Douglass' association with these persons made him aware about the people who were fighting against suppression through writings. He came to know about William and Mary who were writing against slavery and thus propagating equality. Douglass writes about it as, "... their well known testimonies against slavery, made me feel much at home with them at their house in that part of London" (Douglass *Life and Times*).

The feeling of being at home in a foreign country is generally appropriated and can be considered as a significant development in making him a cultivated cosmopolitan. In a nutshell, it is observed that Douglass' ac-

quaintance with above dignitaries along with others established a starting point in his pursuit of racial equality in his homeland and Europe as well. Douglass writes about the visit of England thus: “. . . it afforded me of becoming acquainted with educated people and of seeing and hearing many of the most distinguished men of that country” (Douglass *Life and Times*).

Moreover, it can also be observed that evil practices like injustice and discrimination in the name of race and oppression do not unite people of diverse cultures. In fact, the implementation of these practices creates hierarchy and serves as threat to the construction of cosmopolitan identity. The autobiographer’s stay in Ireland and England clearly indicates that his crusade was against many social issues which aim to disrupt the equality.

Douglass’ Journey to Europe: Cultivating a Cosmopolitan Self

Apart from Douglass’ sojourn in Ireland and England, Douglass toured other European countries like Italy and France. His journey to various cities of above countries and being in contact with European leaders created a “creole self” (Sweeny 54), i.e., a mix of European and African identity in Douglass’ acts and behaviours. The after-effects of the journey had a significant role in propagating cosmopolitan values and equality in his homeland. Further, it also had a profound impact on his personality. According to Bill E. Lawson the period from his escape, i.e., 1838 at the age of twenty to the year 1860 can be counted as the “period of intellectual and personal growth” (118). In this context Alan Rice and Martin Crawford describes his arrival to Britain and Ireland as a “raw material of great black figure” and his departures as “finished independent man” (qtd. in Sweeny 13). Since Douglass witnessed altogether a different culture; his effort and vision of preserving cosmopolitan equality is twofold: inside his homeland and Europe. His extensive cosmopolitan acquaintances and outlook of Europe led Douglass to work for it in the United States. It is noticed that his European journey and good rapport with prominent figures served as an eye opener for Douglass in the fight against racial discrimination and his struggle for equality.

Most importantly, it played a remarkable role in reinforcing the culture of equal treatment in his country. The European exposure rekindled Douglass’ vision of equality; however, the changing environment of United States after the abolition of slavery during that time was equally significant, argues Louis Rodriquez. Douglass changed his agenda from slavery to the idea of a “composite nation” which means “a nation composed of

different races” and thus supported the Chinese Americans (105). For his untiring vision of bringing all races and unite them he was viewed as “the father of the integrationist-equal-rights-movement.” He was known for his opposition to black immigration proposal and as a champion of the cause of integration and civil rights (Goldstein 464).

Douglass discusses about a composite nation i.e., his vision of turning his country to a cosmopolitan nation and says, “All the great qualities are never found in any one man or any one race” (Rodriquez 104). Thus he states emphatically about the need of such a multicultural nation. His views on Chinese immigration and vision of a making Washington D.C. as a cosmopolitan city are the two important aspects in his pursuance to cosmopolitanism. He speaks about Chinese immigration thus: “Do you ask if I favor such immigration, I answer *I would*. Would you have them naturalized, and have them invested with all the rights of American citizenship? *I would*. Would you allow them to vote? *I would*. Would you allow them to hold office? *I would*” (qtd. in Wong 96).

Douglass talks about racial assimilation through a space for both white and black people. As far as the city Washington D.C. is concerned his cosmopolitan identity is revealed when he says that, “I want a home here not only for the negro, the mullato and the Latin races, but I want the Asiatic to find a home here in the United States, and feel at home here, both for his sake and for ours” (qtd. in Culberston 913). It reflects Douglass’ vision of going beyond a particular race and milieu as he thinks about all the races to coalesce in a city. Moreover, his 1877 speech “Our National Capital” highlights his cosmopolitan vision (Culberston 913). This vision is evident when he says about the city thus: “Under its [Washington D.C.] lofty domes and stately pillars, as under the broad blue sky, all races and colors of men stand upon a footing of common equality” (Douglass *Life and Times*). He raises the pertinent question in his speech titled “The Present and Future of the Colored Race in America” delivered in New York thus: “Can the white and colored people of this country be blended into a common nationality, and enjoy together, in the same country, under the same flag, the inestimable blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as neighborly citizens of a common country?” (qtd. in Harris and Tichenor 88) and answers it by saying: “I believe they can” (88).

Douglass’ endeavour to create a multicultural/multiracial society under one identity lies in his experience of oppressive treatment of being a slave. The cruel treatment to slaves opened up his understanding of human race that was based on hierarchy and inequality. After his es-

cape from slavery, Douglass's encounter with William Lloyd Garrison served as a significant impact which shaped his mind to work for the abolition of the institution of slavery. In fact, Garrison and his newspaper *The Liberator* were the earliest guiding forces that made the autobiographer learn about humanity in a racist society. Garrison was an abolitionist and known for his antislavery newspaper. He writes about the influence of the paper thus:

The Liberator was a paper after my own heart. It detested slavery – exposed hypocrisy and wickedness in high places – made no truce with the traffickers in the bodies and souls of men; it preached human brotherhood, denounced oppression, and, with all solemnity of God's word, demanded the complete emancipation of my race. I not only liked – I *loved* this paper, and its editor. (*My Bondage* 284)

Douglass' association with Garrison resulted in the shaping of his personality and he became more humane in his thoughts and behavior. It prepared the foundation stone of social consciousness vis-à-vis equality and the formation of cosmopolitan space. Garrison's activism in the field of abolitionism made the autobiographer think and work for social reform in a broad way by taking in to account of multiculturalism. When we think about the mind of Douglass in this period, Waldo E Martin Jr. (a historian) rightly observes that, the encounter was "educational experience and spiritual rebirth" (22). Though Douglass was self educated, he acknowledges Garrison for giving him the formal education. The historian also writes about the impact of the famous abolitionist thus: "It was primary source for his moral and religious philosophy of social reform. It helped Douglass to crystallize and to expand his beliefs in man's basic goodness, human perfectionism, and human progress" (22).

Thus, the attempt to unify both white and black people can be viewed as a step towards annihilation of racism in America and more importantly bringing the humanity as a major force for the establishment of a egalitarian and cosmopolitan society.

Conclusion

Being a cultivated cosmopolitan, Douglass' personal life was not distinct from his public life. He successfully lived the idea of going beyond one race in his private life. The value of transcending race and coming to racial equality was reflected through his interracial marriage. He married a

white woman at the age of 66, after the death of his first wife Anna. His second wife Helen Pitts worked as a secretary and the marriage sparked controversy and criticism. Douglass indeed argued for the unification of race and the “importance of transcending race, of thinking about the oneness of humanity” (Levine 218) and thus emphasized the cosmopolitan vision. His cultivated cosmopolitan perspective is evident as he declares: “I am not an African, as may be seen from my features and hair, and it is equally easy to discern that I am not a Caucasian” (qtd. in Levine 218). When we think about this statement it is observed that Douglass accepts all races and more importantly embraces humanity as a whole rather than some separate groups.

The two autobiographies offer author’s observations and experiences of two cultures: One inside the U.S.A. where racial discrimination seems ubiquitous, and another, outside the U.S.A. i.e., Europe where equality is appreciated in all walks of life regardless of race and gender. It is noticed that the latter has a profound impact upon the authorial mindset of Douglass. It is clearly evident as we can also see that the author’s vision is not only to work for black rights but also to strive for equality for both black and white people. Thus Douglass manages to create a multiracial and multi-ethnic society.

Works Cited:

- Beros, Martin. “Cosmopolitan Identity- Historical Origins and Contemporary Relevance.” *Tabula: časopis Filozofskog fakulteta, Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile u Puli*, no. 14, 2016, pp. 197-211.
- Cavallar, Georg. *Kant’s Embedded Cosmopolitanism: History, Philosophy, and Education for World Citizens*. De Gruyter, 2015.
- Culberston, Graham. “Frederick Douglass’s “Our National Capital”: Updating L’Enfant for an Era of Integration.” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2014. pp. 911-935. doi: 10.1017/S002187581400067X.
- Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Yale UP, 2014.
- . *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Kindle ed., Dancing Unicorn, 2016.
- Ferreira, Patricia J. “Frederick Douglass in Ireland: The Dublin Edition of

- His 'Narrative.'" *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2001, pp.53-67. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20557687.
- Goldstein, Leslie Friedman. "Racial Loyalty in America: The Example of Frederick Douglass." *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1975, pp. 463-76. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/447367.
- Harris, Richard A, and Daniel J. Tichenor. editors. *A History of U.S. Political System: Ideas, Interests and Institutions*. vol. 1, ABC-CLIO, 2010.
- Lakhanpal, Sharad. "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: The World Is One Family." *Arthritis&Rheumatology*, vol. 70, no 5, 2018, pp. 662-68. doi: 10.1002/art.40435.
- Lawson, Bill E. "Douglass Among the Romantics." *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass*, edited by Maurice S. Lee, Cambridge UP, 2009, pp. 118-31.
- Levine, Robert S. "Road to Africa: Frederick Douglass's Rome." *African American Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2000, pp. 217-31. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2901250
- Rodriquez, Louis. "Frederick Douglass and Latino Immigration." *Counterpoints*, vol. 406, 2012, pp. 104-14. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/42981622
- Salenius, Sirpa. "Troubling the White Supremacy-Black Inferiority Paradigm: Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown in Europe." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2016. pp. 152-63. doi: 10.1080/14794012.2016.1169872.
- Strath, Bo. "World History and Cosmopolitanism." *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, edited by Gerard Delanty, Routledge, 2012, pp. 72-84.
- Sweeny, Fionnghuala. *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World*. Liverpool UP, 2007.
- Wong, Edlie L. *Racial Reconstruction: Black Inclusion, Chinese Exclusion, and the Fictions of Citizenship*. New York UP, 2015.