Chapter-V

CONCLUSION

When we look back at Frederick Douglass's life as revealed in his three autobiographies we see the evolution of the slave to a man. Though it may appear simplistic to suggest that the evolving sense of selfhood is the key theme of his autobiographies, yet such a suggestion is not far from the truth. Douglass's reasons for writing his life story is not only to silence the critics who doubt his former life as a slave but it is also because of his need to define himself publicly. A lot of thought has obviously gone into the title of his first autobiography because *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* is definitive of the kind of man Douglass wants to become. His sufferings in the past have added to the aura of the man and the title, *an American Slave*, adds to the portrait of Douglass as the heroic slave.

A study of his life reveals a man who is remarkable for his accomplishments. From an ignominious beginning as a fatherless mulatto slave, Frederick Douglass is able to overcome all social and intellectual disadvantages to emerge as a kind of Moses for his people. An admirable quality in him is his ability to focus on the goal that he has set for himself. Not many young boys of thirteen years appreciate the role that education can play in freeing a person physically and psychologically
from the shackles of slavery. Yet at this young age, Douglass is mature enough to see far into the future, to understand things which ought to have been beyond his grasp. It is because of his foresight, that he is able to understand the implication of Hugh Auld’s tirade against his wife Sophia for teaching Douglass the alphabet. Whereas another might have been cowed down by this show of domination by Auld, in the case of Frederick Douglass, it only serves to whet his appetite to know more, convinced now that it is only ignorance and illiteracy which is keeping the slave in fetters. It is only when both the body and mind are free that true liberation can be achieved. With this intelligence to guide him, Douglass embarks on a remarkable journey that few have been able to emulate.

What shines through in Douglass’s personality is his optimism and grittiness and his never say die attitude. These qualities have enabled him to overcome all the disadvantages of slavery where a man’s head, limbs and body belong not to himself, but to another. It is because of the sheer dynamism of his character that Douglass is able to shed the stupor and numbness inflicted upon him by slavery, to rise up once again like the Sphinx, to continue his self education and share it with his fellow slaves who are eager to receive some of these drops of knowledge. He tries to break the shackles of slavery with his first attempt to run away with some
of his friends while living with Mr. Freeland. Though thwarted in his attempt by a friend’s betrayal, yet his desire for freedom, the freedom to be his own man, to own himself continue to burn like embers in his heart. This desire to be free is compounded by his master’s action of sending him to Baltimore instead of selling him down South.

Frederick Douglass is a strategist of the first order. He is not one who will let an opportunity slip through his fingers, therefore when he is sent to live again with Hugh Auld in Baltimore to learn a trade, he uses this chance to make his way to the North and freedom. Hugh Auld is deliberately lulled into a feeling of complacency by Douglass who pretends to be a model slave, giving up all his earnings to Auld. Yet it is exactly at this time that Douglass is feverishly planning his escape which is finally executed when he takes the train to New York, disguised as a sailor and with a sailor friend’s pass in his pocket.

In the North Frederick Douglass is able to forge a road that will ultimately lead him to the corridors of power in Washington D.C. Through the sheer dynamism of his character he is able to carve a place for himself in the annals of his country. His travels to England, Ireland and Scotland, where he is able to drum up support for the abolitionist movement in America, serve to enhance his store of knowledge. In America Douglass is used to hearing “we don’t allow niggers in here”
when he tries to gain entrance to certain institutions but in England he is treated as an honoured guest wherever he goes. These interactions with some of the leading figures in English society stimulate Douglass’s intellect and broaden his perspective. During his first visit, Douglass is able to impress his English hosts to such an extent with his verbal powers and agility of mind that they buy his freedom from Auld for seven hundred and eleven dollars so that he can return back to America a free man and continue his battle against slavery without fear of being captured by slave hunters.

Through the sheer force of his character he is able to emerge as a spokesman for his people. His work as an abolitionist, as an editor of *The North Star* an abolitionist paper and as a Superintendent of the Rochester Underground Railroad serves as credentials for his later work. Douglass is also able to play a role during Abraham Lincoln’s tenure as President of the United States, which also saw the beginning of the Civil War between the North and the South. To Douglass the War is a welcome event because for him it is a war against slavery. Therefore he lobbies President Lincoln on two fronts: to abolish slavery and to let Blacks join the war. When President Lincoln agrees to allow Blacks to fight against the Southern rebels Douglass labours tirelessly to recruit Black men to the Union army.¹
In his long career as an abolitionist, a speaker, a voice for his people, Douglass has had to face a number of hurdles but remarkably he always manages to emerge unscathed. An example is the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company to which he is appointed as President in 1874.² Though some critics blame Douglass for not turning things around, yet many understand that it was humanly impossible for him to change the fortunes of an irresponsibly run institution like the Freedmen’s Bank. The greatest deterrent in Douglass’s career has always been his skin colour. So many doors have been deliberately closed in his face because the White men in power cannot bear the thought of rubbing shoulders with a former slave. Douglass however never allows these deprivations to hinder his tenacious climb towards self improvement. In fact Frederick Douglass’s greatest conquest is over himself, that slavish part of him. What is important to him is not his personal success story, what matters to him is that his people, the tormented sable race, must achieve equality and that they must be given the same opportunities as everybody else. Douglass scorns pity; sympathy is what he wants White America to feel for his people.

White, western philosophers like Hegel, Kant and Hume have dismissed Blacks as inferior to the white race in intelligence, morality and spirituality.³ This comes as no surprise because White men have always
wondered whether the African is a species of man or not or whether they can even master the arts and sciences. Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote in a footnote to his essay, *Of National Characters*:

> I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than whites, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, arts, no sciences.  

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher wrote further:

> The negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling.... So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour.

In spite of these dismissive comments passed against their race, slave narrators have been able to prove through their stories and writings that they are not so obtuse as to be unconscious of the wrongs committed against them. Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies stand as proof to these statements. Through his books, Douglass has emerged as a lion of his race, a man whose intellect has taken him to heights never before imagined. Frederick Douglass presents himself not only as a deliverer of his people from the jaws of slavery but he also presents himself as a leader who has fought tirelessly for their citizenship and equal rights. It is appropriate that in his last autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass should express his confidence that his life has been a “life of victory, if not complete, at least assured.”
Frederick Douglass’s importance and influence in African American literature is immeasurable. Of Douglass’s three autobiographies it is the *Narrative* which has received the most critical attention as well as the highest critical acclaim. The inclusion of the *Narrative* in Hennig Cohen’s *Landmarks of American Writing* in 1969 signifies its acceptance into the American canon. In his essay *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Benjamin Quarles calls the *Narrative*, “a landmark in the literary crusade against slavery.” After years of obscurity, it is only now that the second autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* is being recognised as one of the crucial ‘I-narratives’ of the 1850’s in America. Frederick Douglass’s books are now compared to the first-person writings of stalwarts like Thoreau and Walt Whitman. William L. Andrews considers the *Narrative* as ‘the’ central text in Afro-American autobiography studies and he also asserts that this book is one of the five canonical texts in Afro-American autobiography, the others being Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings*.

Inspite of the popularity of his books, particularly the *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass makes no claim to literary greatness even though his writings have been recognised as more meritorious than his speeches.
Generally speaking, his writings 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. His autobiographical writings, especially the *Narrative*, are noted for its literary qualities but more than this, his writings are able to strike a chord with the mood of the age. In an age which is characterized by reformist movements – women’s rights, peace, public school education and others, Douglass’s writings are seen as the most unsettling and revolutionary of all reforms.⁹

A discussion of Frederick Douglass will not be complete without mentioning his speeches. Douglass manages to hone his skill as an orator while working as a general agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society or the Garrisonians from 1841 to 1854. His brilliant command and use of language, his intellectual brilliance quickly made him one of the more popular speakers in antislavery meetings. Some of his most famous and popular speeches are *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July, Self-Made Men, Lessons of the Hour* and others. As an orator Frederick Douglass is second to none and many times he is able to control an unruly crowd through the sheer magnetism of his voice. A memorable incident occurs on August 25, 1893 on Coloured People’s Day when Douglass was 85 years of age. As Douglass begins to read his written address
called *The Race Problem in America* inside the Festival Hall, white hecklers started interrupting him with their jeers and catcalls. After faltering in his speech for a minute, Douglass suddenly throws down his papers and with flashing eyes begins to speak extempore about the Negro problem in America. "Full, rich and deep, came the sonorous tones, compelling attention, drowning out the catcalls as an organ would a penny whistle."\(^{10}\)

A significant detail about Douglass’s disposition is that he never made the mistake of considering his education as completed. Sophia Auld sets the ball in motion by introducing him to the world of knowledge but when these lessons come to an abrupt end Douglass himself takes the initiative to further his self-education. It must have been a painstaking task to teach himself how to read and write, but Douglass perseveres in this endeavour by surreptitiously copying the letters of the alphabet from Tommy Auld’s *Webster’s Spelling Book*. Frederick’s education proceeds even further with his acquisition of *The Columbian Orator*, a book that he buys with his hard saved money. McFeely writes, “Seldom has a single book more profoundly shaped the life of a writer and orator.”\(^{11}\) This fascination with education will remain with him throughout his life. Douglass’s obvious intellectual superiority is even more amazing when we consider that he has never had a day’s formal schooling. Whatever he
knows has come from his own sheer hard work and dedication to self-improvement. To Douglass, his education is a continuous process and he doesn’t believe that learning can only take place within the four walls of a classroom. Maybe it is because of this belief that none of his children attended college after graduating from high school. Because Douglass believes that education is continuous he becomes involved in a number of causes because each one of these causes contributes to his knowledge. In 1848 he becomes involved with the Women’s Rights Movement, an association which will endure till his death in 1895. What makes Frederick Douglass so unique is his incessant thirst to know further and towards the closing years of his life he is a stronger man intellectually than ever before.

Douglass’s portrayal of his life and times in all his three autobiographies has had a profound effect on all who have read his books. James McCune Smith has correctly said that Frederick Douglass is more than an American hero. He is a Black American hero whose achievements stand as convincing witness not only to his racial heritage but also to his affiliation to all that is good about America. Frederick Douglass has been correctly called the Father of the Civil Rights Movement in America and the rhetoric of the Narrative works in tandem with the Black experience of the 1960’s. Douglass has been able
to provide a Black perspective through his writings because his thoughts have come from within him and they are embellished in his own words. No matter how much he embraces universal humanistic ideals as the motive of his writing, Douglass cannot run away from his colour because for the man who was born a chattel, he will always be a Negro first, a representative of Black America. Therefore in his last autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass presents his life as a symbol of Black success, having accomplished a number of firsts in his lifetime. However Douglass is not without his critics who accuse him of having been co-opted by affluence, self-interest, political debts and an undue regard for white acceptance. Inspite of these accusations, Douglass continues to be the most illustrious representative of the sable race in America. Moreover, Douglass’s appeal is not limited to his own race or to Americans alone. He has the ability to touch the conscience of mankind as a whole and that power can be felt even today, more than a hundred years after his death. The sable race’s sacrifice and struggle through the centuries finally yielded fruit when on January 2009, Barack Obama became the first Black President in the history of the United States of America.

Douglass has been able to sustain his role as a model for later Black leaders and in his writings he has projected himself not only as a
leader of his people but also as a kind of messiah. Because he is truly a
hero, a man who upholds his principles no matter what, later Black
writers from Booker T. Washington to W.E.B. Du Bois have all sought to
“appropriate their own autobiographical self-portraits the African
American culture hero first created and projected by Frederick
Douglass.”13
End Notes


2 After discovering that the institution is insolvent, Douglass tries to reorganize it with the help of John Sherman, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, but on June 28 the trustees vote to close the bank. The bank’s failure causes thousands of freed people to lose their savings.


5 Ibid., p.xl.


11 Ibid., p. 34.
