

Ambivalence in the Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass

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Abstract:

This article walks around Ambivalence in the Narrative of the life of Fredrick Douglass. This piece of study is significant because it provides postcolonial perspective to the analysis of main character of the novel with the application of Homi Bhaba's concept of ambivalence in order to explain protagonist subversiveness and submissiveness and love- hate relations with his masters. This article evidently divulges that, How White master's language and racism make the protagonist of the novel an ambivalent character.

Key Words: *Ambivalence, Post colonialism, Colonizers, Colonized*

Introduction

According to Oxford Dictionary, the term Ambivalence is the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone. The term ambivalence first developed in psychoanalysis to describe a repetitive fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. It also refers to a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action (Young, 1995:161). This very definition of ambivalence is applicable on Douglass character. On one hand he hates his masters for their cruel attitude and on the other hand he shows profound interest in learning their language. Frederick Douglass was born into slavery sometime in 1817 or 1818. Like many slaves, he is unsure of his exact date of birth. Douglass is separated from his mother, Harriet Bailey, soon after he is born. His father is most likely their white master, Captain Anthony. Captain Anthony is the clerk of a rich man named Colonel Lloyd. Lloyd holds hundreds of slaves, who call his large, central plantation the "Great House Farm." Life on any of Lloyd's plantations, like that on many Southern plantations, is ruthless. Slaves are overworked and dog-tired; receive little food, few articles of clothing, and no beds. Those who break rules—and even those who do not—are beaten or flagellated, and sometimes even shot by the manor overseers, the cruelest of which are Mr. Severe and Mr. Austin Gore.

Douglass's life on this plantation is not as hard as that of most of the other slaves. Being a child, he serves in the household instead of in the fields. At the age of seven, he is given to Captain Anthony's son-in-law's brother, Hugh Auld, who lives in Baltimore. In Baltimore, Douglass enjoys a comparatively freer life. In general, city slave-owners are more conscious of appearing cruel or remiss toward their slaves.

Sophia Auld, Hugh's wife, has never had slaves before, and therefore she is astoundingly kind to Douglass at first. She even begins to teach Douglass to read, until her husband orders her to stop, saying that education makes slaves unruly. Eventually, Sophia succumbs to the mentality of slave owning and loses her natural amiability. Though Sophia and Hugh Auld become crueler toward him, Douglass still likes Baltimore and is able to teach himself to read with the help of local boys. As he learns to read and write, Douglass becomes conscious of the evils of slavery and of the existence of the abolitionist. He resolves to escape to the North eventually.

After the deaths of Captain Anthony and his remaining heirs, Douglass is taken back to serve Thomas Auld, Captain Anthony's son-in-law. Auld is a mean man made harsher by his false religious piety. Auld considers Douglass unmanageable, so Auld rents him for one year to Edward Covey, a man known for "breaking" slaves. Covey manages, in the first six months, to work and whip all the spirit out of Douglass. Douglass becomes a brutish man, no longer interested in reading or freedom, capable only of resting from his injuries and enervation. The turning point comes when Douglass resolves to fight back against Covey. The two men have a two-hour fight, after which Covey never touches Douglass again.

His year with Covey over, Douglass is next rented to William Freeland for two years. Though Freeland is a milder, fairer man, Douglass's will to escape is nonetheless renewed. At Freeland's, Douglass begins educating his fellow slaves in a Sabbath school at the homes of free blacks. Despite the threat of punishment and violence they face, many slaves from neighboring farms come to Douglass and work diligently to learn. At Freeland's, Douglass also forms a plan of escape with three fellow slaves with whom he is close. Someone let down their plan to Freeland, however, and Douglass and the others are taken to jail. Thomas Auld then sends Douglass back to Baltimore with Hugh Auld, to learn the trade of ship caulking.

In Baltimore's trade industry, Douglass runs up against strained race relations. White workers have been working alongside free black workers, but the whites have begun to fear that the increasing numbers of free blacks will take their jobs. Though only an apprentice and still a slave, Douglass encounters violent tactics of terrorization from his white coworkers and is forced to switch dockyards. In his new apprenticeship, Douglass quickly learns the trade of caulking and soon earns the highest wages possible, always turning them over to Hugh Auld.

Eventually, Douglass receives permission from Hugh Auld to hire out his extra time. He saves money bit by bit and eventually makes his escape to New York. Douglass refrains from describing the details of his escape in order to protect the safety of future slaves who may attempt the journey. In New York, Douglass fears recapture and changes his name from Bailey to Douglass. Soon after, he marries Anna Murray, a free woman he met while in Baltimore. They move north to Massachusetts, where Douglass becomes deeply engaged with the abolitionist movement as both a writer and an orator.

The term ambivalence is initially taken by Homi Bhabha (2004) from Freud, who says it occurs when “opposing pairs of instincts are developed to an approximately equal extent” (Bhabha 124). Bhabha borrows the term to characterize the psychic identification of the white colonial authority. In Bhabha’s opinion, identity forms not from a self-reflection in human nature or a place for the self in a distinction between culture and nature, but in a relation to the other:

[T]he question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification – that is, to be for an other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness (Bhabha 45).

Ambivalence is a key stone of Bhabha’s theory and is according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s (2007) a term commonly used in post-colonial theory to explain the distressed state of mind which occurs when simultaneously attracted toward and rebuffed from an object, person or action. It explains the problem which arises in the meeting of two opposing cultures whereas assumptions, habits and values of the superior culture are imposed on the “uncivilized” culture. But instead of conforming to the culture of the “civilized”, an unwanted effect displays itself as the “uncivilized” takes on a condition of mimicry, not far from mockery, - which only produces uncanny copies of the colonizers. It is in this troubled relationship between the colonizer and the colonized where the condition of ambivalence is born (Ashcroft et al. 10).

According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, Maxwell in their book *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) suggests that it is not as simple as the colonizer being the oppressor and the colonized being the oppressed, an argument made account for in the following quotation:

A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labor. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model. (9)

By dismissing the obsolete view of which colonial relations through history has been regarded in terms of simple binary oppositions, such as black colonized vs. white colonizers and Third world vs. the West, - we are provided different lenses to view colonial history through.

Homi Bhabha (1997) begins his essay, 'The other question', emphasizing the importance of not assuming colonial stereotypes are always fixed or straightforward. He reminds us that, "the colonial stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive" (Bhabha 40). Reformulating ideas about ambivalence taken from psychoanalytical theory, Bhabha argues that colonial discourse is often in two minds about its treatment of the indigene, pushing away but pulling towards, simultaneously repulsed and attracted to its Other

(Ashcroft et al12). For Bhabha (Bhaba 51) colonial discourse, with all its stereotypical images about the Black and distant other, is "curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief". As a consequence, there emerges a "peculiar intimacy" between the colonizer and the colonized (Suleri 112).

Ambivalence is the ambiguous way in which colonizer and colonized regard one another. The colonizer often regards the colonized as both inferior yet exotically other, while the colonized regards the colonizer as both enviable yet corrupts. In a context of hybridity, this often produces a mixed sense of blessing and curse. Bhaba claims that we regularly see ambivalence in the attitudes and desires of the colonial subject who is often continually in a state of "fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite" (cited in Young, 1993, 161). Young (115) agrees suggesting that one of the features of colonialism is the extent to which the colonizers have love-hate feelings towards the indigenous people.

Bhabha's conception of 'ambivalence' is derived from Freudian analysis, and he elaborates it in his book, *The Location of Culture*. In psychology, ambivalence means two divergent instincts that exist at the same time. In postcolonial discourse, ambivalence can reveal that the colonial subjects experience irresolvable tensions between desire and derision simultaneously, as the colonized will not be simply entirely opposed to the colonizer but appears to be both 'complicit' and 'resistant' in the colonial discourse. The colonized is expected to be the compliant subject who imitates the colonizer's values and habits, which is regarded as mimicry by the colonizer. However, there is a plenty of evidence to show that the colonized turns out to be an ambivalent subject whose mimicry is like a mockery. Bhabha gives an example of Charles Grant, a missionary who tried to teach Christianity in India in 1792. However, due to his concern for political stability, he blended the Christian doctrines with the divisive Indian caste system, which resulted in inaccurate translation of the Bible and 'a false copy of English characters' (Bhaba 87). More noteworthy is that such ambivalence can bring disorder to the absolute authority of colonial domination by disrupting the binary relationship between colonizers and colonized. Bhabha wants to turn this indeterminacy of colonial discourse into an agency of counter-hegemonic resistance, as he contends that "the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undesirability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention"(Bhaba 112). Robert Young (2003) also suggests that the theory of ambivalence is a destruction of imperial discourse. Since the periphery is initially regarded as "the borderline, the marginal, the unclassifiable, the doubtful' by the Centre, now the Centre is constituting itself with an 'equivocal, indefinite, indeterminate ambivalence" (Young 161). The conception of ambivalence is particularly important to this study, as it demonstrates how anti-colonialist resistance is possibly produced (Young 186). The ambivalence engendered in colonial discourse can create the instability of colonial power which may strengthen the anti-colonialist resistance. This indeterminacy can be turned into an agency of counter-hegemonic resistance in colonial discourse.

Bhaba is the foremost modern-day critic who has tried to unveil the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse in order to highlight the colonizer's *ambivalence* with respects to his attitude towards the colonized *other* and vice versa. He says that the jeopardy of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/ recognition of the colonial object (Bhabh 126).

The notion of the ambivalence is worth mentioning in Fanon's books. Frantz Fanon was born on the Caribbean island of Martinique, under the colonial rule of France, and became a psychiatrist, philosopher, writer, revolutionary, and a founding theorist of postcolonial thought. His first book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) is a powerful account of the social-psychological effects of colonialism. In it, Fanon vividly describes the sense of dependency, inferiority, and shame felt by Black colonial subjects, arguing that the constant need to see one's self through the colonizers' eyes leads to a divided perception of the world and one's self. According to the Fanon "the colonized intellectual, at the very moment when he undertakes a work of art, fails to realize he is using techniques and a language borrowed from the occupier. The colonized intellectual who returns to his people, through work of art behaves in fact like a foreigner" (160).

Fanon's book *Black Skins, White Masks* (1962) encapsulates the sense of colonial ambivalence and presents contradictory position of the black self in relation to the white others. It reveals an internal conflict the colonized subject who speaks, behaves, dresses like the white 'masters' (that is mask) but remained differentiated (discriminated against) by the darker color of her or his skin. So, being black remains a sign of difference and reminder of inferiority. Fanon focuses on internal conflict experienced by colonized subject, the desire to be white and the acknowledgement of difference which prevents the realization of that desire. In his book *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon says:

For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other. The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with another Negro. This self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question. . . ." (17).

W.E. B. Du Bois's (1965) concept of "double consciousness" has a close link with postcolonial criticism, particularly in concepts such as "ambivalence" or religious and cultural identities of modern Muslims. Double Consciousness is a term coined by Du Bois to describe an individual whose identity is divided into several facets. As a theoretical tool, "double consciousness" reveals the psycho-social divisions in American society and allows for a full understanding of those divisions. Du Bois' focus on the specificity of black experience allows for challenging injustice in national and world systems. Du Bois define double consciousness as:

Double consciousness is sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (215)

DuBois explains that colored people are forced to view themselves from, and as, the negative perspectives of the outside society. Having two antagonistic identities means that a lot of time and energy is spent negotiating and enduring the conflicts between who one is as a person and how one struggles to live with the misrepresentations of the outside world. Having one's own sense of self and also having imposed contempt for an ascribed self, having two-ness, is what DuBois calls double consciousness.

Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, and in *Black Skin White Masks*, reveals that colonized people have Du Boisian double consciousness. He reveals exactly the colonized struggle of two-ness that Africans Americans share. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, He writes:

“Speaking as an Algerian and a Frenchman”...Stumbling over the need to assume two nationalities, two determinations, the intellectual who is Arab and French..., if he wants to be sincere with himself, chooses the negation of one of these two determinations. Usually, unwilling or unable to choose, these intellectuals collect all the historical determinations which have conditioned them and place themselves in a thoroughly “universal perspective.” (155)

Fanon comes closest to DuBoisian double consciousness by saying, overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has to place himself...[H]is customs and the sources on which they are based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (1967: 110)

Other writers on colonialism also reveal problems of postcolonial ambivalence. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi (1967) says:

The candidate for assimilation almost always comes to tire of the exorbitant price which he must pay and which he never finishes owing... [H]e has assumed all the accusations and condemnations of the colonizer, that he is becoming accustomed to looking at his own people through the eyes of their procurer. (123)

In the light of different theorist views, we can say that the theory of ambivalence has depended largely on ideological constructions of division and exclusion of the other.

Analysis:

In the Narrative of Fredrick Douglass, we see that Douglass, the central character is involved in

love-hate relationship. In the beginning of the narrative he condemns slavery and the cruel attitude of his masters. He says that slaves are deprived of/from basic education. Their masters deliberately want to keep them in the dark in order to maintain their authority on them. He uses the word “Horse” for the slaves in order to show how much work their masters want to take from them. He describes this in the following words;

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record of 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 I have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. (p.41)

He says that the slaveholders enjoy a lot while whipping their slaves. They show extremely indifferent attitude towards their sufferings. He gives an example of his aunt who is very brutally treated by her master. The more she cries the more her master whips her and he keeps beating her until she is literally covered with blood. He describes it in this way;

He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slave holding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping the slaves. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he use to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literary covered with blood.(p.45)

The slaves do not have enough courage to resist their masters. It is the basic tactic of their masters to keep them away from the knowledge so that they may not revolt against their masters. Right from the very beginning this thing is inculcated in their minds that they are only to serve their masters. He gives the example of slaveholder who brutally kills his slave who refuses to obey his master. He describes the whole phenomenon in the following words;

Mr. Gore once undertook to whip one of Colonel Lloyd’s slaves by the name of Demby. He had given Demby but few stripes, when to get rid of the scourging, he ran and plunged himself into a creek --- Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls and that if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him. ---raised his musket to his face taking deadly aim at his standing victim (p.57).

The transfer of Douglass to Baltimore entirely changes his life. There he learns how to speak and write his master’s language. At this time his character becomes an ambivalent. He, on one hand entirely denounces the slavery hood and on the other hand

he is obsessed with his master's language. He gives the detail account of all the hardships he comes across in learning. Mrs. Auld is the one who provides him with the basic education but once her husband comes to know about it, he immediately forbids her to further teach him. He tells her that teaching a slave may be harmful for the masters. Once she becomes aware of this fact she check-up upon him. Even if she finds him reading a newspaper, then it is enough to enrage her, but he doesn't stop here. He adopts various strategies in order to equip himself with knowledge for he thinks it is the only way he can get freedom from his slave holder. It is quite evident that his character is ambivalent. On one hand he has a good reason to hate his white masters but on the other hand he is obsessed to learn their language. He develops friendship again with these white children whom he hate in order to equip himself with their knowledge. He describes the whole process in the following words;

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read (p.67).

It is the knowledge which has enlightened his mind that Black people are not bound to obey their White masters. They have their separate individuality and they should be allowed to live freely irrespective of any authority. It has developed a resistive attitude in him. So it is the knowledge which has turned him into an ambivalent character, and particularly his reading of "The Colombian Orator" entirely changes his mind. He says that whenever he thinks of being a slave for life, it really makes him upset. He refers to his state of mind as;

The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers (p.68).

At the end we notice that this conflicting attitude of resistance against slavery and obeying White masters tears his personality into two selves. At one time he really regrets his learning; he says it is a curse for him rather than a blessing. This very thing shows ambivalence in his personality. I will conclude with these words of Douglass;

I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast...anything no matter what to get rid of thinking! (p.68)

Conclusion:

Through close observation and analysis of the text, illustrations, and emotions of the character, one can see that Douglass is an ambivalent character. On one hand he denounces slavery and on the other hand when he is enlightened with knowledge even he gets the final emancipation of his mind yet he is unable to resist his White masters. All of these aspects and observations of his character makes a sense of the ambiguous nature of Douglass' true identity.

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